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PROPER PRIDE.

PROPER PRIDE.

A NOVEL.

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BY

B. M. CROKER,

AUTHOR OF 'PRETTY MISS NEVILLE,' ETC.

Life may change, but it may fly not ;
Hope may vanish, but can die not ;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth,
Love repulsed—but it returneth.

A New Edition.

LONDON:
WARD & DOWNEY,
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PROPER PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

MALTA.

DECEMBER in Malta is very different from that month in England. There is no snow, no black frost, no fog; a bright, turquoise-blue sky, and deep indigo sea, smooth as glass, and dotted here and there with the white sails of fishing boats, make a becoming background for this buff-coloured island. The air is soft, yet exhilarating; a perfume of oranges, cheroots, and flowers pervades the atmosphere. Little boys, with superb dark eyes, are thrusting delicious bunches of roses and heliotrope into the hands of passers-by, and demanding 'sixpence.' The new piano-organs are grinding away mercilessly at the corner of every street. A trooper, a Peninsular and Oriental, and a vicious-looking ironclad are all in simultaneously, and Valetta is crammed. Such, at least, was the scene one December afternoon, not many years ago. It was the fashionable hour; the Strada Reale was full of shoppers, sightseers, and loungers; half the garrison was strolling up and down. Fat monks in

brown, thin nuns in black, fruit-sellers, Maltese women in their picturesque faldettas, soldiers, sailors, rich men, poor men, beggar men, and no doubt thieves, thronged the hot white pavement.

Outside Marîche's, the well-known tobacconist, two young men, bearing the unmistakable stamp of the British warrior of the period, were smoking the inevitable weed.

Cox, 'the horsey,' with hands in pockets, was holding forth at intervals, to Brown, 'the *blasé*,' and ladies' man *par excellence*, of the gallant smashers.

'Never saw such a hole as this is in my life—*never!* No hunting, no shooting, no sport of any kind. Think of all the tip-top runs they are having at home now! If *The Field* is to be believed, there never was such going; nor, for the matter of that, such grief. Here we are—stuck on an island; water wherever you look; not a horse worth twenty pounds in the place!'

'Oh come, my dear fellow,' remonstrated his friend, 'what about the Colonel's barb, and half-a-dozen others I could mention?'

'Well, not a *hunter*, at any rate, and that's all the same. If we are left here another year, I believe I shall cut my throat—or get *married*.'

Looking at his companion with critical gravity, to see how he took this tremendous alternative, but observing no wonderful expression of alarm or anxiety depicted on his face, he continued to puff furiously at the cigar which he held almost savagely between his set teeth. Suddenly he exclaimed,—

'By Jove! there's that Miss Saville that all the fellows are talking about! Why, she's nothing but a schoolgirl after all.'

'Nevertheless she is the prettiest girl in Valetta,' replied Mr Brown, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and gazing with an air of languid approval after a tall slight figure, in a well-cut blue serge

costume, that, in company with an elderly lady, was crossing the Palace Square.

'By the way, Brown, who *is* this Miss Saville when she is at home?'

'Miss Saville,' replied Brown, propping himself against the doorway, and evidently preparing for a narrative, 'is— In the first place, an heiress, four thousand a-year, my dear boy—think of that.'

. . . . . .

Encouraged by a nod from Cox, he proceeded,—

'She is also an orphan.'

'Good!' quoth Cox emphatically.

'But you need not run away with the idea that she is an unprotected female. She has a guardian,' continued his friend impressively.

'It seems that her father, General Saville, saved or made a lot of money out in India, and this girl was his only child. Her mother died when she was a baby, and she was sent home and received a first-class education, including *all* the extras. Are you listening?'

'Of course I am; get on with the story.'

'Well, old Saville, who had always meant to come home and live on his fortune and repose on his laurels, trusted too long to the climate, and left his bones in the cemetery at Lahore, and his daughter to his great chum, Sir Greville Fairfax, with her fortune and her hand, both tightly tied up, not to marry without his full consent, not to come of age till she was five-and-twenty, and all that sort of thing, you know.'

'Yes, yes; go on.'

'Hurry no man's cattle, the day is young,' said Brown, removing his cheroot after two or three pulls, and contemplating it with apparent interest.

'About six months later,' he proceeded, oracularly, 'Sir Greville died suddenly of heart disease, and it was found by his will that he had passed on the guardianship of the fair Alice to his son—to

his *son*, a young fellow of four-and-twenty, a captain in the Fifth Hussars, and now with his regiment in India. What do you think of that?'

'Think!' returned his friend, with emphasis; 'I think it was meant as an uncommonly strong hint for the son to marry her.'

'And so he will, be sure. A pretty girl, with four thousand pounds a-year and no relations, is not to be had every day. I only wish I had such a chance. But I am afraid that a sub in a marching regiment, with a pittance of a hundred pounds a-year and his pay, would be rather out of the running.'

'You may say so,' replied Cox candidly, plunging his hands still deeper into his pockets. 'That old dowager would make short work of "the likes of you," as they say in the Green Isle.'

'No doubt she would. She is a Miss Fane, an aunt of Fairfax's, and has been all autumn at Nice; and is now here on a visit to the Lee-Dormers. Of course she will keep the fair Alice for her nephew.'

'How do you know all this? How do you know her name is Alice?' inquired Captain Cox.

'Oh, I know a good many things,' returned his friend, with careless complacency, resuming his cheroot and a critical inspection of all passers-by.

His companion gazed at him for some moments with a kind of sleepy admiration, and then suddenly burst out,—

'Is this Fairfax a dark, slim, good-looking fellow? for I recollect a Fairfax, an A1 rider, winning the Grand Military at Punchestown some three years ago; he was in the cavalry, I know.'

'Yes, that's he—Reginald Fairfax. Since then he has been improving the shining hour in the gorgeous East, tiger-shooting, pig-sticking, polo-playing, and so on. His regiment is in this season's reliefs, and, very likely, on its way home now.'

'But the Fairfax I knew had lots of coin, never

went near a lady, and would be the last man in the world to settle down and get married. He cared for nothing but sport of all kinds—hunting, racing, shooting, and so on; and if he is the identical guardian, Miss Saville is likely to remain Miss Saville as far as he is concerned. Money would be no temptation to him,' he concluded, triumphantly.

'Well,' rejoined Mr Brown, 'if he won't marry her someone else will; it will be all the same to you and me. Here, my cheroot is out; come along and take a turn in the Strada, and give the natives a treat.' *Exeunt*, arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER II.

ALICE SAVILLE.

AMONG the passengers who landed at Southampton from the Peninsular and Oriental *Rosetta*, one warm August afternoon in the year 1858, was a stout, well-to-do Bengali ayah. Her stoutness spoke for itself, her gold nose-jewel, heavy seed-pearl earrings, massive necklet, bangles, and toe-rings amply vouched for her monetary ease. She carried on one arm a thick black-and-red plaid shawl (her own property), and on the other a pale, fragile, wistful-looking infant, dressed in a short white embroidered pelisse, white bonnet, and enormous black sash.

This miserable, puny little orphan had lived and thriven, and developed into the beauty and heiress alluded to by Captains Brown and Cox.

. . . . . .

All through her early childhood she had been the care, no less than the idol, of her grand-aunt and uncle Saville, an old maid and an old bachelor, who resided in an imposing but slightly

dilapidated mansion in the centre of a large wild-looking demesne, near some unpronounceable village in the south of Ireland.

Here, for nearly ten years, little Alice—thanks to a supposed delicate constitution—was allowed unlimited freedom from lessons, lectures, punishments, and all the restraints that young people of her years specially detest. It was true that her fond aunt made a valiant attempt to 'do lessons' with her for one hour daily; but how often was that hour curtailed in deference to the pleading of a jovial, indulgent old grand-uncle?

Allowed her own way almost entirely, she brooked no constraint; for she had a fine spirit, as her relations complacently remarked. Her violent bursts of passion were passed by unchecked. It was merely the Saville temper, as much hereditary, and seemingly as much to be proud of, as her violet eyes and the far-famed Saville nose. Mounted on her chesnut pony she would accompany her uncle in his rides or scour *solus* round the fields, with her long golden hair streaming in the wind, looking far more like a spirit than an ordinary Christian child.

'Ay, but isn't she the beautiful fair creature to be born in that black country?' the servants and retainers would observe to each other, with mingled admiration and amazement.

At ten years of age Alice Saville could barely read; wrote large intoxicated-looking round-hand; knew nought of arithmetic, sewing, or spelling; and was, without doubt, as pretty and complete a little dunce as could be found in the whole province of Munster.

Nevertheless, she had *some* accomplishments. She was a wonderful rider for her years, and could and would ride any colt on the premises; gaily careering round and round the lawn, and sticking on as if she were part and parcel of the animal, to

the pride and delight of all beholders. Moreover, she could jabber Irish, and was well versed in all the old lore, legends, fairy-tales, and superstitions current within the four adjoining counties.

Alice had ten years of boundless liberty, and at the end of that time her uncle died, his estate passed to the next heir, and his sister, finding herself no longer the mistress of a large, liberally-kept establishment, but, on the contrary, an old maid in straitened circumstances, removed to a small house in the suburbs of Dublin, and talked of sending her niece to school.

. . . . . .

Alarming rumours now began to reach Sir Greville Fairfax. His ward was an unkempt, uneducated, bare-legged little wretch, running wild among the bogs of Ireland. What a terrible picture was conjured up before his mental vision. He became at once alive to a sense of his responsibilities, and sought the advice of his most immediate matronly neighbours without a day's delay.

'She must be sent abroad!' this was the universal opinion, that rather disappointed her guardian; for, to tell the truth, he had had hopes of keeping her under his own roof, with a governess to look after her manners and education. Since his son had gone to Sandhurst the house seemed remarkably lonely and silent, and he would have liked the child of his old friend Maurice Saville to have made her home with him. He had been her guardian now for more than a year, and he had actually never seen her. But when he had taken the suffrages of his most intimate lady-friends, this hope was quenched.

'She must be sent abroad,' was their verdict; nothing else could possibly counteract that odious Irish accent. Lady Bertram knew of such a charming establishment where two of her nieces had been for years.

Three miles from the city of Tours, and within sight of the village of Roche-Corbon, stood an old grey château, almost buried in woods. The Revolution of '92 had most effectually dispersed its former owners, who surely in their wildest flight of imagination never dreamt that their venerable roof-tree would become one day a boarding-school for the English 'Mees'—'Not a school,' Madame Daverne affirmed, merely a few young friends, whose education she undertook to superintend for the consideration of three hundred pounds per annum; and a very good investment Madame found that old château and its rickety obsolete furniture. It is true that she kept a *char à banc* and a pair of fat white horses for the use of her young friends. How otherwise could they go to Tours thrice a-week to receive lessons in music, singing, painting, riding, fencing, and dancing? How otherwise attend the English church once a-day on Sunday? But Jules and his horses were not an expensive item — rent and living were cheap; Madame was a manager, a strict disciplinarian, and a most excellent teacher.

The château at Rougemont was a delightful place to its young English inmates, entirely different to a great, formal, stiff house at home, with so many rooms on each floor, all the same size, and nothing interesting or unusual from garret to cellar. Here in the château, with its little pepper-castor towers and corkscrew staircases, they were constantly making some novel discovery, whether of a secret panel, or a secret stair, a well, a picture, or a grave. It had even been hinted that an *oubliette* was somewhere on the premises. Rougemont far more resembled the Palace of the Sleeping Beauty, with its large kitchen and hall, long stone passages and spacious courtyard, than the orthodox establishment for young ladies. It was surrounded by a garden laid out in terraces, connected by flights

of shallow steps, and ornamented with clipped yew-trees, closely resembling in shape the toy-trees of the sheepfolds of our youth, and a wonderful and varied collection of stone, plaster, and even coloured wooden statues, which burst upon the eye in the most unlooked-for and surprising manner.

Madame Daverne, the English widow of a French *avocat*, was a little, thin, middle-aged woman, invariably dressed in grey, and never seen without her spectacles. She wore her still abundant dark hair in plain bandeaux—a long-exploded fashion—and no cap. Although her domestic arrangements were managed on a liberal English scale, and she believed in plenty of cold water, open windows, and *tea*, still she had lived sufficiently long in the country of her adoption to have imbibed a very strong prejudice in favour of *surveillance*, especially as regarded the young friends under her care. No idle chatter about the boys at the Lycée of love, of lovers, was ever permitted; novels and romances were unknown and unread. The great outside world, with its sayings and doings, was an unexplored region to Madame Daverne's pupils. Nevertheless, her six young friends found a good deal of happiness in each other's society; they spent a very busy, healthy life—rambles in the forest, tennis, *la grâce*, and gardening were their usual amusements, and every Thursday during summer and autumn they made expeditions to Loches, Blios, Chinonceaux, Plessis les Tours, Amboise, or other places of, as Madame observed, 'well-known historical interest.'

More than six years had passed since the wild little Irish imp had arrived at Rougemont; and in those years what a change had come over her! How marvellously she had improved! Her gusts of passion were among the things of the past, her goat-like impulses had been subdued, her craving to ride every horse she met had long been curbed,

her ignorance—who dares to talk of ignorance in connection with Madame Daverne's most brilliant and most accomplished pupil?

Few girls take leave of school and school-fellows with as much regret as Alice Saville. Rougemont has been her home, and she has no desire to leave the shelter of its grey walls and venture out into the world alone among strangers. She loves every stick and stone about the old place; every feature in the landscape she looks out on is a dear familiar friend; from the 'Lanterne' itself to venerable Marmoutier, from Marmoutier to the Cathedral, whence comes the *Angelus*, faintly audible across the waters of the swiftly-rolling, poplar-fringed Loire.

To-morrow Alice is to leave Rougemont for ever. Miss Fane, her guardian's aunt, is at this instant in the city of Tours. To-morrow she comes to fetch her away; and no child at the zenith of her enjoyment at a children's party ever heard the terrible words, 'Your nurse has come,' with a chillier thrill of dismay than did Alice, when Madame Daverne announced to her that her future protector was about to remove her from her care.

Alice and her friends are sitting on some broken stone steps; she in the middle, of course—for is not this their last evening together? and are they not all very fond of Alice, and very, very sorry that she is leaving them? They may well be fond of Alice, for she is the brightest creature that ever lived, and the life and soul of the little community; a favourite with everyone, from Madame herself down to an old lame *femme de ménage* occasionally called in on domestic emergencies. Who could sing, and dance, and tell ghost-stories like her? Who dressed up and acted with the inimitable talent of their fair-haired school-fellow? Who was as generous, as unselfish, as ready to help, to give, or to lend, as Alice? Bright and gay, warm-hearted and clever,

all the inmates of Rougemont know that when she departs she will leave a blank behind her impossible to fill.

Think of the prettiest girl you ever saw, and it may give you some faint idea of Alice Saville, as she sat on the topmost step but one, with her hands locked round her knees (an easy if not graceful attitude), and her eyes gazing down on the valley of the Loire for the last time. Had your beauty mischievous violet eyes—eyes whose colour was a mystery to many, owing to their rapid change of expression and their sweeping black lashes; quantities of golden-brown wavy hair rippling and curling away from her forehead, a roseleaf complexion, a purely Grecian profile, and seventeen summers?

. . . . . .

The farewells have been said three months ago; many tears were shed—and dried; and now the curtain rises upon new scenes. Touraine and its picturesque old châteaux and dim green woods fade away, to give place to the narrow, sun-scorched, steppy streets of Valetta.

In a cool spacious apartment, overlooking a Moorish courtyard, filled with orange-trees in green tubs, and various semi-tropical plants, Alice and Miss Fane are sitting reading. The post has just come in, and Miss Fane is revelling in an abundant supply of letters, which flutter and rustle in an aggravating manner as the cool sea-breeze steals in and plays with them, and seems to try to snatch from their recipient the full enjoyment of their contents. The breeze plays tenderly and lovingly with Alice Saville's stray little curls, but she reads on and takes no notice. Nothing short of a 'Levanter' would rouse her from her study —'Ivanhoe.' The world of fiction has been opened to her at last! Miss Fane thinks that 'there is no harm in the Waverley Novels, with the exception

of the "Heart of Midlothian;"' *that* is carefully put aside; any of the others Alice may read; and Alice is rapidly devouring them. Her crewel-work lies neglected on the floor; her cup of tea stands at her elbow untasted; and all her thoughts are entirely engrossed in the storming of Torquilstone Castle.

Miss Fane and Alice had spent the autumn in visiting Rome, Florence, and Nice, and were spending a few weeks in Malta before returning to London, where they were to reside together; and Alice was to make her *début* the ensuing season. She found Valetta altogether delightful. Fresh from her studies, with the history of the crusades and of the Knights of Rhodes and Malta still green in her memory, the half-mediæval, half-oriental aspect of the place fascinated her beyond measure. Many an hour did she spend in the old Cathedral of St John, endeavouring to decipher the tombs with which its numerous chapels are paved. Her knowledge of French and Italian helped her to find out the meaning of their Latin inscriptions, and many and various were the stories she mentally wove about those valiant, war-worn, monkish soldiers lying beneath her feet. 'Exploring' was Alice's favourite recreation, as she was not, strictly speaking, 'out' as yet; and balls, dancelettes, and yachting picnics were unknown pleasures. The long narrow streets, the 'Nix Mangiare' stairs, the odd steep ascents, were an amusing and delightful novelty to her light, active feet, but a sore detested pilgrimage to Miss Fane's gaunt old bones. The mysterious little shops that line these queer streets of stairs were another perennial source of interest, including the sleek cats that sat sentry in almost every doorway. The Maltese themselves were capital subjects for sketches or study; whether they lay flat on their backs, basking in the sun, with their caps pulled

over their faces, or lounged in lazy groups about the corners of picturesque old houses, or drove their huge betasselled mules up and down the steep stradas, they were ever and always a fresh novelty to Alice. She little knew that she herself outrivalled the 'fried monks' as one of the 'sights of Malta;' or that she was the object of general interest and admiration, as, escorted by her austere-looking chaperon, she roamed about, satisfying the curiosity of youth and the craving of a highly imaginative mind.

Miss Fane had been working steadily through her correspondence. Long crossed letters, resembling lattice-work, occupied her for the best part of an hour. At length she came to one in a bold, black, manly hand, not crossed, not even filling two pages. She knit her brows more than once as she perused it, then slowly folded it, put it in its envelope, and fastened a look that a basilisk might have envied on her companion.

Glancing up from her novel with a frank, fearless countenance, she encountered Miss Fane's cold grey eyes critically surveying her over the top of her tortoiseshell pince-nez. To describe Miss Fane more paticularly, she was a prim, dignified, elderly lady, seated bolt upright on the most uncompromising chair in the room. She had well-cut aristocratic features; a high, arrogant-looking nose; rather a spiteful mouth; iron-grey sausage curls, carefully arranged on either temple, and surmounted by a sensibly sedate cap. A very handsome brown silk dress, as stiff as herself, completed her costume.

Not being overburdened with this world's goods, owing to the failure of the bank in which most of her fortune had been invested, she had accepted a very handsome allowance, and the post of chaperon to her nephew's ward. If she could have had this immense increase to her income *without* the ward,

so much the better; girls were not to her taste! but though narrow-minded, frigid, and intensely selfish, she was strictly conscientious, according to her lights, and was thoroughly prepared to do her duty by her young companion.

'Alice,' she said, glancing from Alice to the note she held in her hand, and then back again with an air of hesitation, 'I have just heard from my nephew, your guardian, you know. He expects to leave India immediately; and if the *Euphrates* stops here for coaling, he says he will come and look us up. Would you like to read his letter? Perhaps I ought not to show it to you; but it will give you some idea of the kind of young man he is.'

'Thank you,' replied his ward, stretching out a slim, ready hand; 'if you really think I *may*, Miss Fane?' she added, interrogatively, whereupon Miss Fane handed her her nephew's effusion, which ran as follows:—

'CHEETAPORE.

'MY DEAR AUNT MARY,—I got your last letter all right. I did not answer it at once as I had nothing to say, and am no scribe at the best of times. I quite agree with you, that you had much better take entire charge of Miss Saville now she has left school; but why not have kept her there another year or two? Your suggestion is excellent, and you will make a much more fitting guardian than my unworthy self. I do not know what on earth I should have done with her if you had not come to the rescue. I cannot imagine what possessed my father to leave *me*, of all people, guardian to a girl. Of course I shall look after her money affairs, etc., but I hope you will take her off my hands completely. No doubt she will marry soon, as you say she is pretty, and if the *parti* is anything like a decent fellow, and comes up to the mark in the way of settlements, you may take my consent for granted—I shall say:

"Bless you, my children," with unmixed satisfaction. I am bringing you some shawls, curios, etc., to make amends for my shortcomings as a correspondent. We sail from Bombay on the twenty-second, and if we coal at Malta I shall look you up. What in the world took you there? It strikes me you are becoming a regular "globe-trotter" in your old age.—Your affectionate nephew,

'R. M. FAIRFAX.'

'What a funny letter, or note rather!' exclaimed Alice; 'only two sides of the paper. The Fifth Hussars have a very pretty crest; and what a good hand he writes! He certainly seems very anxious to get rid of *me*, does he not, Miss Fane? I am afraid I am a great infliction,' she added, colouring; 'but I will do my best to trouble him as little as possible.'

'*I* will make you a much more suitable guardian,' returned Miss Fane complacently. 'I do not know what my brother-in-law could have been dreaming about when he made his will. Poor man! he naturally thought he had yet many years to live, and never contemplated your having such a preposterously young guardian. Reginald cares for nothing beyond his profession—horses, racing and men's society. My brother-in-law spoiled him as a boy, and allowed him his own way completely, though I believe he was a good son and very much attached to his father. Greville was a weak-minded man,' she pursued, shaking her head reflectively, 'governed first by his wife, and then by his son. Reginald has always been his own master, and is headstrong and overbearing to the last degree.'

'You don't like him, Miss Fane?' inquired Alice, slightly raising her eyebrows.

'Ah, well!' hesitatingly, 'I don't exactly say *that;* I have seen so little of him since he was a boy; and then he was, without exception, the most troublesome, mischievous, impudent urchin I ever

came across; always in trouble, falling out of trees, or downstairs, or off his pony; playing practical jokes; fighting the gardener's big boys; riding his father's hunters on the sly. He kept everyone in hot water. I spent six *months* at Looton, and added six *years* to my life,' concluded Miss Fane, nodding her head with much solemnity.

The truth was, Miss Fane had gone to Looton on a very long visit, with the intention of remaining permanently as virtual mistress. Her easy-going brother-in-law would have made no objection, but her impish nephew immediately saw through her object, and made her life unbearable. His practical jokes were chiefly at her expense, and the way in which he teased her beloved poodle was simply intolerable. She had to give up her intention of remaining, and leave what she had fully intended to have been a most luxurious home.

This she had never forgotten, nor forgiven; her feelings on the subject had been stifled, but they smouldered. She never cared for her nephew—never would; he was far too like his mother—her handsome step-sister—whom she had detested with all her heart. Nevertheless, she found it to her advantage to be on apparently good terms with her liberal and wealthy relative, who had not the remotest idea of the real feelings his aunt secretly cherished towards him.

. . . . . .

About a week later the *Euphrates* came into Malta, late one evening. Miss Fane and the Lee-Dormers were dining at the Governor's; Alice, not being 'out,' had tea *solus* at home.

Time hung heavily on her hands; her book was stupid, she was not in the humour for music, and it was too early to go to bed. Opening the window, she stepped out on the balcony that ran all round the house, and overlooked the courtyard. Here she remained for a long time, her chin resting

on her hand, indulging in a day-dream—'in maiden meditation, fancy free.' The air was laden with the perfume of twenty different flowers; but the fragrant orange-trees in their tubs down below overpowered all.

'How delicious!' said Alice to herself, sniffing the air. 'If I am ever married—which is not very likely—I shall have a wreath of real orange-blossoms, always supposing I can get them.'

Presently she turned her attention to the stars, and endeavoured to make out some of the constellations, not very successfully, it must be confessed. She listened to the distant driving through Valetta.

'Belated sightseers returning to their steamers,' she thought.

Just then a carriage drove rapidly into their quiet street, and seemed to stop close by.

'It can't be Miss Fane come home already; they are barely at coffee yet,' she mentally remarked, as she settled herself for another reverie.

After a while, feeling rather chilly, she pushed open the window and stepped back into the sitting-room. For a moment the light dazzled her eyes. That moment past, what was her amazement to find a handsome young man, in undress cavalry uniform, standing on the rug with his back to the fire!

The surprise was apparently mutual. However, he at once came forward and said,—

'Miss Saville, I am sure. The servant said my aunt was out, but that you were at home. As the room was empty, I concluded you had gone to bed.'

'When did you arrive?' she asked, offering her hand.

'We came in about two hours ago, and are going to coal all night—a most detestable but necessary performance.'

'Have you been here long?' was her next question, as she seated herself near the table.

'About twenty minutes. I have been enjoying this English-looking fire immensely. You must have found it rather chilly in the verandah, I should say.'

A thought flitted through his mind,—'Was there a Romeo to this lovely Juliet?' He looked down at her with a quick, keen glance. No; the idea was absurd.

'What were you doing out there this cool evening?' he added.

'Nothing,' she replied, shyly. She could not bring herself to tell this brilliant stranger that she had been simply star-gazing.

'A regular bread-and-butter miss,' he thought, as he pulled his moustache with a leisurely patronising look.

Bread-and-butter or not, she was an extremely pretty girl, and his ward. The idea tickled him immensely. He put his hand before his mouth to conceal an involuntary smile.

'Vernon or Harcourt would give a good deal to be in my shoes, I fancy,' he said to himself, as he took a seat at the opposite side of the table from his charge.

Alice having mastered her first astonishment, felt that it behoved her to make some attempt at conversation, and to endeavour to entertain this unexpected guest, pending Miss Fane's return. She offered him refreshments, coffee, etc., which he declined, having dined previously to coming on shore. With small talk, Maltese curios, and the never-failing topic—weather, she managed to while away the time. At first her voice was very low, as it always was when she was nervous or embarrassed, but she soon recovered herself, and played the part of hostess in a manner that astonished the man who, half-an-hour before, had called her (mentally) 'a bread-and-butter miss.' Seven years on the Continent had given her at least easy,

polished manners. She had none of the *gaucherie* so common to an English girl of her own age brought up exclusively at home. It seemed to her that Sir Reginald was *shy!*—he sat opposite to her playing with a paper-knife, and by no means properly supporting his share of the conversation. Her good-natured efforts amused him prodigiously. He was sufficiently sharp to see that she thought him bashful and diffident, whereas he was only lazy; he preferred to allow ladies, whenever they were good enough to talk to him, to carry on the most of the conversation, a few monosyllables, and his eloquent dark eyes, contributing his share. Poor deluded Alice! she little knew that the apparently diffident young man was the life and soul of his mess, and that shyness was unknown to him (except by name) since he had been out of his nurse's arms.

Conversation presently became somewhat brisker; they exchanged experiences of France and India. They discussed books, horses, and music, and at the end of an hour Alice felt as if she had known him for at least a year. Certainly they had made as much progress in each other's confidence as if they had gone through a London season together, when a few brief utterances are gasped between the pauses in a waltz, or whispered on the stairs, or interrupted by some spoil-sport in the Row.

As for Reginald, he not only felt completely at home, but, what was worse, most thoroughly bewitched.

'I'm never going to be so mad as to lose my head about this grown-up child, am I?' he indignantly asked himself. 'I who have hitherto been invulnerable, as far as the tender passion is concerned. No! not likely. If I can't face a pretty girl without immediately feeling smitten, the sooner I renounce the whole sex the better.'

Whilst he was thinking thus, he was to all ap-

pearance immersed in a series of views of Rome and Florence, and listening to a description of palaces, churches, and tombs.

There was not the slightest *soupçon* of a flirtation between this couple. Sir Reginald talked to his ward as he would to his grandmother, and there was a look in her clear, deep grey eyes that would have abashed the most thorough-paced male flirt in Christendom—which he was very far from being—a look half of childish innocence, half of newly-awakened maiden dignity—

> 'Standing where the rivers meet,
> Womanhood and childhood sweet.'

Miss Fane duly returned, and accorded her nephew a warm welcome and a kiss, which he very reluctantly received, for she had also a *moustache!* She treated him besides to a most *recherché* little supper, and at twelve o'clock he took his departure, faithfully promising to look them out a suitable house in London, and with an uneasy conviction that he had met his fate.

. . . . . .

I need scarcely tell the astute reader that the acquaintance thus formed, shortly ripened into something else: a few dances—a few rides in the Row—a water-party—the Cup-day at Ascot—finally a moonlight picnic, and the thing was settled.

Before the end of the season the following announcement appeared in the *Times*:—

'On the 25th inst., at St George's, Hanover Square, by the Lord Bishop of Bermuda, assisted by the Rev. H. Fane, Sir Reginald Mostyn Fairfax, Bart., Captain Fifth Hussars, of Looton Park, Bordershire, to Alice Aveleen, only child of the late Major-General Saville.'

Sir Reginald expressed his intention of retiring, much to the disgust of his brother-officers, who

said they thought Fairfax was the last man who would have married and left them. '*You* of all people too! After the way you used to be down on other fellows who fell in love, or got married—it's perfectly shameful! You were actually the means of nipping several very promising affairs in the bud, and now you are going to get 'married' yourself. What excuse have you to make?' cried an indignant hussar.

'I say,' replied Sir Reginald complacently, '"that he jests at scars who never felt a wound." That was my case. Now I'm a reformed character.'

But when at the drawing-room, the opera, and elsewhere, the Fifth saw the future Lady Fairfax, even the most hardened bachelor among them frankly admitted that 'Rex,' as they called him, had a very fair excuse.

After their honeymoon the Fairfaxes went down to Looton, where they were considered the handsomest and happiest couple within three counties.

CHAPTER III.

LOOTON PARK.

LOOTON is a large, ugly, uncomfortable old place, similar to hundreds of others scattered over the British isles. No one knows exactly when it was built, but everyone is aware that it is surrounded by the very best land in Bordershire. The house stands in a large, well-timbered park, and is approached by two avenues from opposite directions.

Seated at the library-table, with his elbows well squared, a young man of about one-and-twenty is dashing off a letter. He is Geoffrey Saville, first cousin to Lady Fairfax, and has lately joined the Fifth Hussars—so lately that he is still doing

riding-school, from which a fortnight's visit to Looton has afforded him temporary emancipation.

He is a slim, bright-eyed, loose-limbed boy, with small impudent hazel eyes, an aristocratic nose, and light-brown hair, of which one utterly unreasonable lock always sticks up on the top of his head, cut, and comb, and oil as he will. He is possessed of the highest of spirits, the best of appetites, and unlimited assurance. He is gay, gentlemanly, and generous, and swears by his new cousin, but old friend, Sir Reginald Fairfax.

Here is his letter :—

'MY DEAR NOBBS,—I promised to send you a line to let you know how I was getting on. Rex and Alice make no end of a good host and hostess; the feeding is superior, and as to horses, I am "all found." Rex mounts me as he mounts himself, and I take it out of his cattle fairly.

'We have had two or three good runs with the R. B. H. and Overstones, especially last Tuesday; found at Heplow—(you don't know where that is, but never mind)—and ran to Clumber, a distance of eight miles as the crow flies, with only one slight check. The pace was prime, the grief awful. The fields were large and airy, but some of the fences, notably the bullfinches, were real raspers. The finish was highly select—Alice, Reginald, two cavalry men, a parson, the huntsmen, and yours obediently. Alice goes like a bird; and in a neat double-breasted brown habit and pot-hat to match, and mounted on a clipping bay thoroughbred, looks very "fit" indeed. Rex pilots her, and they make a very fair average example of the field. You know what a customer he is. She follows him as if she had a spare neck in her pocket, and charges wood and water as boldly as he does himself.

'Talking of water, there is a brute of a river here, called the Swale, which winds about in the most

mysterious manner. You come across it when you least expect it. I have already been in twice! I paid my second visit last Friday. I was steaming along close to the pack, when what should I see in front of me but this sneak of a river. I rammed in the spurs, and thundered down to it as hard as I could go, but I had already bucketed the old horse too freely: he bore down as if he meant business, stopped short, and shot me over his head into about seven feet of muddy water. I'll leave you to imagine the figure I was when I picked myself out!

'I created a fine sensation all along the Queen's highway *en route* home. Alice and Reginald have never stopped chaffing me ever since. You ask me how he plays the *rôle* of married man? Capitally, my dear fellow; and as to your unkind insinuation that I must be rather *in the way*, considering they are so recently married, you never were more mistaken in your life. They are not a bit a spoony couple; at least I never see any billing or cooing, thank goodness, and I favour them with a good deal of my society; but anyone can see with half an eye that each thinks the other perfection, and that they suit down to the ground. He has got a fortnight's domestic privilege leave to go and see poor Maitland of the Blues, who is dying at Cannes; they were great chums always, and at Eton together. Meanwhile I remain here and help old Miss Fane (a bitter specimen of the unappropriated blessing) to take care of the fair châtelaine; and as I am to exercise the hunters, and have the run of the stable, I am promising myself five days a week between the two packs, and the very cream of hunting. I wish you would go to Thomas and hurry him with my tops, and run me in for another fortnight's leave, as enclosed. If the chief looks grumpy, say I have broken my collar-bone. I'll do as much for you another time.—Yours in clover,

'GEOFFREY SAVILLE.'

CHAPTER IV.

A PRACTICAL JOKE.

SIR REGINALD left for Cannes the end of November, intending to spend a week there, and to be home, of course, long before Christmas. Meanwhile, a plot he little dreamt of had been hatched for his benefit. A storm was brewing; in fact, a regular cyclone threatened his domestic atmosphere.

When he was in India, with the Fifth Hussars, among his few lady acquaintances outside the regiment there was one who had taken an immense fancy to him—a fancy he by no means reciprocated. She was the daughter of an old Commissariat officer, who had survived to enjoy his off-reckonings and settled down at Cheetapore. After thirty-eight years of India, he could not stand England, he said; one winter there would finish him.

Miss Mason had been already four seasons on the plains. The climate was beginning to tarnish her beauty—the dark Italian style, her friends declared. Her foes, on the other hand, did not scruple to accuse her of 'four annas in the rupee' —native blood, in fact. She was, nevertheless, one of the belles of the station. Time was flying, as I have said before, her good looks were waning and she was becoming extremely anxious to be settled. Fully determined to marry well, thoroughly bold and unscruplous, and believing firmly in Thackeray's dictum, 'that any woman who has not positively a hump can marry any man she pleases,' she looked about her, to see whom she would have.

One of the Fifth Hussars for choice; they were mostly well-born, and all rich. After some hesitation, she made up her mind that Captain Fairfax

(as he then was) was perhaps the most desirable of the lot. A future baronet, of distinguished appearance, young, rich, and extremely popular, what more could she wish for? Not much, indeed.

But he rarely mixed in ladies' society; and there was a certain *hauteur* about him—a kind of 'touch-me-not' air—that inclined her to think he might give her some trouble. But then he was worth it. How good-looking he was—his keen, dark eyes, regular features, and thick moustache, together with his slight well-knit figure, quite fulfilled her beau-ideal of a handsome, gallant hussar.

So she prepared to lay siege to him, and at once commenced to bring her heavy guns into action. But it was in vain, all in vain. It was useless to way-lay him in the ride of a morning; with a hurried bow he cantered on. It was equally futile to get a friendly chaperon to escort her to cavalry parades on Wednesday mornings, for after drill he invariably went off to stables. Polo, at which he was a great performer, was also a blank, as whenever it was over, instead of lounging and talking to the lady spectators, he mounted his hack and disappeared. At the races she was more successful, and began to think she was making way at last. The Hussars had a tent, and, being one of the hosts, Sir Reginald was brought in contact with her repeatedly. But what she attributed to special attention was merely the courtesy with which he treated all the sex.

At balls she danced with him several times; but she could see that he much preferred dancing to talking, and grudged every moment that she wasted in conversation. However, 'Rome was not built in a day.' 'Patience,' she thought, 'and I shall be Lady Fairfax yet. He is no flirt, and does not devote himself to any lady here, married or single. All this is a point in *my* favour,' she reflected. 'He only wants drawing out; he is reserved and cold, but never fear, I shall thaw him.' She invited

him repeatedly to her father's house, invitations which he steadily and politely declined, and, still not discouraged, made a point of stopping and accosting him wherever they met, were it on the road, coming out of church, or at the band. She endeavoured to arrange playful bets on trifling subjects, and made frequent allusions to the language of flowers; forced button-holes on him, and finally calling him to her carriage as he was riding past at the band, one evening—it was dark, and he fondly hoped to disappear unnoticed—she entreated him to dismount and have a chat.

'I cannot—very many thanks—as this is guest-night, and I have some fellows coming to dinner, and it is now'—looking at his watch—'a quarter to seven.'

'And what of that?' she returned, playfully; 'surely you can spare *me* a few minutes?'

Dead silence, during which her victim was revolving in his brain his chances of escape.

'Have you any sisters, Captain Fairfax?' she inquired, apropos of nothing.

'No; I wish I had.'

'You would be very fond of them, I am sure,' effusively.

'I daresay I would.'

'Ah!' she exclaimed, leaning over and patting his horse's back caressingly, and looking up into his face with her bold black eyes—'ah, Captain Fairfax, how I should like to be your sister!'

With an imperceptible shudder he replied, in his most frosty tone,—

'You do me far too much honour, Miss Mason.'

'Not at all,' she said, impressively; '*nothing* is too good for you, in my opinion.'

'You are very kind to say so, I am sure,' he replied, much embarrassed. 'I must really be off,' gathering up his reins.

'Stay, stay—one second,' she entreated. 'You remember the cracker we pulled together at the

General's on Monday, and I would not show you the motto? I was ashamed.'

'No doubt you were; some wretched, vulgar rubbish—' preparing to depart.

'No, no, not that,' she cried, eagerly, 'only—only—you will understand all when I give it to you—when *I* give it to *you*, you understand. I know you will not think it either wretched, or vulgar, when you read it. Do not look at it till you get home and are quite—quite *alone*,' she added, pressing an envelope into his most reluctant hand.

'All right,' he replied, taking off his hat and rapidly riding away, only too glad to escape.

In the privacy of his own room he opened the mysterious envelope and held its contents—a narrow slip of paper—to the lamp. It ran as follows :—

'My hand, my heart, my life, are thine;
Thy hand, thy heart, thy life, are mine.'

'Not that I know of!' he exclaimed, fiercely, and colouring to the roots of his hair. 'The woman must be insane,' he muttered, tearing the motto into fragments and scattering them on the floor. 'She could not really think I cared two straws about her. If it is a joke, as of course it is,' he proceeded, 'it is by no means a nice one, or one that a thoroughly lady-like girl would ever dream of practising. If she *were* my sister,' he continued, with a grim smile, 'I would give her a piece of my mind that would astonish her weak nerves. God forbid she was any relation to me!' he added, fervently. 'I'll give her an uncommonly wide berth for the future.'

This mental resolve of his was most rigidly carried out. He avoided Miss Mason in an unmistakable manner, and held aloof from society on her account. It took her some time to realise this painful fact, but when she did grasp it her whole soul rose in arms; and hearing about the same period a remark he had made about her, viz., that she might be considered a fine-looking woman, but

was not at all his style, and that he thought her awfully bad form.' This, though breathed in confidence over a midnight cheroot, *en route* from a dance where Miss Mason had been making herself more than usually conspicuous—came round to her ears, and acted like a match in gunpowder, oil in flame. The most venomous hatred took the place of her former admiration, and an insatiate craving for revenge filled her fair bosom—a revenge she fully determined to gratify on the earliest possible occasion.

Time went on, the Hussars left for England, and the wedding of Alice and Reginald found its way into the *Home News*. 'Now,' thought she, 'I will have my innings. I will drop a shell into his camp that will astonish him, to say the least of it, and I'll light the match at once.'

. . . . . .

Miss Mason's dearest friend, and inveterate ally, was spending the day with her. It was October, and although the hot weather was a thing of the past, yet it was still warm, and occasionally muggy. Tiffin concluded, the two ladies retired, Indian fashion, to Miss Mason's room, and there donned cool white dressing-gowns, and subsided into long cane-lounges. For some time the monotonous creaking of the punkah-rope alone broke the silence.

Presently Miss Mason said, 'Harriet Chambers, I have been a good friend to you. Have I not stood by you through thick and thin, and helped you out of one or two nasty scrapes?'

'You have indeed, dear Charlotte,' replied Mrs Chambers, in grateful accents, and with a visibly heightened colour.

'Well, now, I want you to do something for me—only a trifle after all, but still I would rather trust you than anyone?'

'What can I do? Whatever it is, I shall be only too glad,' returned Mrs Chambers effusively.

'Well, my dear, I'll soon tell you. You recollect Captain Fairfax of the Hussars?'

'Yes, of course I do; a dark young man, who won the Arconum cup, and spent all his time out shikarring.'

'Exactly; but he found time enough to be very rude to me, and I wish to pay him off somehow.'

'But what did he do?' asked Mrs Chambers, her curiosity aroused.

'Never mind what he did—he treated me shamefully, cruelly, abominably,' returned Miss Mason, with venomous *empressement* and a noble indifference to facts.

'Well, at any rate, he has left the country now,' put in Mrs Chambers soothingly.

'But a letter can always reach him. I know his address at home. He is just married, and I was thinking of giving them a little bone of contention to amuse themselves with—something to ruffle up the dead, flat monotony of the honeymoon. For instance, a sham marriage certificate would give her a good fright.'

'Oh! but my dear Charlotte,' gasped her friend, raising herself to a sitting posture, 'you are joking. You would not think of such a thing.'

'Would I not?' replied Charlotte, with an unpleasant laugh and shake of her head. 'I have thought of it, and, what is more, I mean to do it.'

'But you might cause fearful mischief; and, besides, I am sure it's forgery,' Mrs Chambers added, with an awestruck voice.

'Not a bit of it,' said Miss Mason lightly. 'I have laid all my plans. Listen,' she continued, sitting up. 'Oh, bother these mosquitoes,' waving her handkerchief to and fro. 'Now, attend to me. You know the clerk of All Saints', a stupid, drunken old wretch, who would sell his soul for ten rupees? I have bribed him to let me have the church register and a lot of spare printed copies

of certificates—blank forms, you know. I pretend I want to look out something for a friend. He brought the register here this morning, and I am to have it ready for him when he calls after dark; for, although there are very few weddings—more's the pity—and no one troubles about the register at All Saints', yet such books are not supposed to go travelling about in this style. Here it is,' and from beneath the mattress of her bed she produced a thick calf-bound volume. 'Here are the printed forms,' she continued, getting up and busying herself arranging a writing-table, which she pushed towards her friend, whose eyes followed her movements in dumb amazement. 'Now,' she said, 'Harriet, you are to copy a certificate of marriage on one of these blank strips, do you see?'

'I?' cried Mrs Chambers. 'Good heavens! Charlotte, you are out of your mind! It would be downright forgery. You are mad to think of it.'

'Forgery! Folly—it's only a joke. After the first glance, no woman in her senses would see it in any other light. It's a joke, I tell you—a *joke*, and I know,' she added, looking her friend straight in the face, 'that for several *reasons* you will not refuse me.'

'Oh, but really—really,' faltered her victim.

'Yes, but really you will do it. Do you think I would ask you to do anything that was not right—that was illegal? Come, come, Harriet, here is a chair. You imitate writing so splendidly, you will have to oblige me, and I'll give you my gold swami earrings into the bargain, besides all the good offices I have already done for you.'

Finding herself in the presence of a vigorous will, Mrs Chambers, who was weak-minded and indolent, eventually succumbed, and very reluctantly settled to her task. The last marriage certificate was used as a copy, and splendidly imitated by Mrs Chambers, the name of Reginald Fairfax was substituted for the man, and Fanny Cole for

the spinster. 'The witnesses' and the cleryman's signatures were added. The only name that was really forged was the clergyman's: 'A correct copy of certificate of marriage, as signed and attested by me—HUGH PARRY.'

This was a facsimile; the remaining part of the certificate was in a round clerkly hand, as if copied by that functionary. It was finished, and, villanous document as it was, was in every respect to all appearance an authorised and legal copy of a certificate of marriage.

Miss Mason having quieted her friend's scruples by assuring her over and over again that it was 'only a joke,' and having refreshed her with five-o'clock tea and half a brandy-and-soda, and sworn her to profoundest secrecy, dismissed her tool with much affectionate demonstration. She then locked up the book and papers and went for a drive, with the calm conviction that she had done a good afternoon's work. The following day an anonymous letter containing the mock certificate was despatched to Lady Fairfax.

I should here mention that when the old clerk called for the register and his ten rupees, and got them, he hastened to the Bazaar and laid in a fine supply of arrack, which he conveyed to his solitary 'go-down.' His orgie was on such an extensive scale that when he upset a lighted kerosene lamp he was perfectly incapable of stirring or extinguishing it, so he and his house and the marriage register were all consumed together. This occurrence was related to Miss Mason a few evenings afterwards at the band, as one of the items of local 'gup;' also that the church register was missing—had recently and mysteriously disappeared; and that the general belief was that the defunct clerk had made away with it.

Miss Mason received the intelligence as a polite but totally disinterested listener; but as she rolled along the dusty roads in her carriage, on her way

home, she thought all the time of her little joke and its probable consequences.

'"Sweet is revenge, especially to women." I forget who wrote that; but it's true,' she murmured. 'Mine is even more complete than I had expected. Mr Parry is dead; the clerk and the register burnt; the witnesses, John and Jane Fox, gone to Australia nearly two years ago. Clear yourself if you can, Sir Reginald Fairfax; I'll not help you; and I think you will find that I have given you a difficult task.'

Such were Miss Mason's reflections, and her amiability for the next two or three days was as surprising as it was unbounded. Occasionally she would lean back in her low capacious Singapore chair, drop her book in her lap, and indulge in a long and evidently delightful reverie, bewildering her foolish old father by sundry fits of wholly unexplained suppressed laughter.

'What ails you, Charlotte, my girl? What's the matter?' he asked once, somewhat timidly.

'Oh, nothing. Nothing that would interest you, daddy; only a little bit of a practical joke that I have played on somebody.'

CHAPTER V.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

ALICE, Miss Fane, and Geoffrey were seated at the breakfast-table one drizzling December morning. The post had just come in. Geoffrey, having unlocked the bag, was distributing the letters.

'One for you, Miss Fane; looks like a bill,' said he mischievously. 'Two young-lady letters for you, Alice, and one from Fairfax, of course. I wonder he does not write thrice a day, and telegraph at intervals, "How are you, my darling? Are you

thinking of me, my treasure?" What will you give for it? It's a pretty thick one,' feeling it critically. 'See what it is to be a bride,' and he chanted—

> 'They were never weary; they seemed each day
> Fresh ecstasy to imbibe;
> And they gazed in each other's eyes in a way
> That I really can't describe.
> And once it was my lot to see
> What shocked my sensitive taste:
> They were sitting as close as wax, and he
> Had his arm about her waist.'

'That you never did, you rude boy. Here, give me my letter at once, sir!' cried Alice, half rising.

'Madam, take it. You need not be blushing like that; it makes me quite hot to look at you. After all, you never did shock my sensitive taste as yet, and I hope you never will. Now for the newspapers,' diving again into the bag. 'Halloa! here's another letter, Alice—from India, I declare, and a good fat one too. Who is your correspondent—a former disconsolate admirer, writing from the East to upbraid you with your perfidy?'

'Nonsense, Geoff; how can you talk such utter rubbish? I'm sure I don't know who it can be from,' turning the letter over. 'Cheetapore! I know no one there.'

'Well, look sharp and open it, and you'll soon see. Most likely a bill of Reginald's. I thought he was a ready-money man,' said Geoffrey austerely.

Alice cut the envelope cautiously, and drew out a thin note and a long slip of paper. The note ran as follows:—

'MADAM,—The enclosed will show you that Sir Reginald Fairfax is not *your* husband. He has deceived you as he has deceived others. His quiet exterior conceals his real disposition. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

'ONE WHO KNOWS HIM WELL.'

Greatly bewildered, and with trembling hands, Alice unfolded the enclosure, and gazed at it for some time before she exactly understood what she was looking at.

Copy of Certificate of Marriage, All Saints' Church, Cheetapore.

Reginald Mostyn Fairfax, Bachelor—Fanny Cole, Spinster.

Hugh Parry, *Clerk.*

Jane Fox and John Fox, *Witnesses.*

White as a sheet, and trembling like a leaf, Alice handed this, along with the letter, to Miss Fane.

'What does it mean, Miss Fane?' she asked, almost in a whisper.

Miss Fane, having adjusted her pince-nez carefully, took both and read them, and as she read her countenance changed from purple to yellow, from yellow to purple, Alice meanwhile devouring her with her eyes.

'I cannot make it out,' she said at last. 'It seems to be a perfectly correct copy of a certificate of marriage, does it not, Geoffrey?'

Geoffrey stretched out a ready hand for the letter and certificate; but the first glance at the letter had the same appalling effect on him as on the two ladies. After a dead silence, during which the ticking of the clock and falling of the cinders were distinctly audible, he plucked up courage to say,—

'A hoax, of course.'

'How are we to know that?' asked Miss Fane, drawing herself up.

'I'll take it up to London, and show it to some first-rate solicitor, and ask his opinion; it's only four hours by rail. Will that do?' pushing back his chair and looking at Alice interrogatively.

'Yes, do, my dear Geoff; and go at once,' she cried, eagerly; 'for though I know it is a ridiculous mistake, still I feel quite odd and frightened. But

perhaps,' she added, after a moment's pause, 'we should wait till Reginald comes home the day after to-morrow; he will clear it up. Yes, second thoughts are best; we will wait, thank you, Geoff, all the same.'

'No, no, my dear!' said Miss Fane emphatically, 'the sooner the matter is cleared up the better. I must beg you to take my advice on the subject as a person much older and more experienced than either of you. Geoffrey can easily catch the ten o'clock train. It is now,' looking at the clock, 'a quarter-past nine.'

After a short discussion, during which the elder lady carried all before her, it was settled that Geoffrey was to start at once; so he quickly bolted his breakfast, and within half-an-hour was speeding up to London as fast as an express could take him. Thinking it better to consult some older head, he drove from Waterloo Station to Wessex Gardens, where Mr and Mrs Mayhew, Sir Reginald's first cousins, lived. The honourable Mark and his wife were at luncheon when Geoffrey entered, and without any beating about the bush he bluntly told his errand. They examined the certificate with the greatest incredulity, and laughed at the idea of 'Rex,' of all people, committing bigamy, 'he so upright, so honourable, a man of stainless character, who had never been known to have a love affair in his life till he met Alice,' they chimed alternately. 'The idea was really too absurd; they wondered Geoffrey could lend himself to such a wild-goose chase.' Nevertheless there was the certificate, 'And just to show that it is a forgery and to relieve Miss Fane's mind, you and I, Geoff, will take it to some respectable solicitors and quietly ask their opinion,' said Mr Mayhew. So they took it to Bagge & Keepe, an intensely correct firm; and Mr Bagge, after carefully scrutinising the certificate for some seconds, unhesitat-

ingly pronounced it to be a genuine copy, and swore to the handwriting of the Rev. Hugh Parry, who had been one of their clients for years. 'I can show you any number of his letters, and you can judge for yourselves, gentlemen,' he added, preparing to open a brown japanned box, on which 'R. and H. Parry' was emblazoned in large white characters.

. The little hatchet-faced lawyer, with his penetrating grey eyes and mutton-chop whiskers, seemed so perfectly confident of the identity of the signature and the truth of the certificate, that Mr Mayhew's breath was, metaphorically speaking, quite taken away, and he gazed from him to Geoffrey—whose visage had visibly lengthened—with an air of utter stupefaction. His moral equilibrium was completely shaken, as he glanced from Mr Bagge to the deed-box, from the deed-box to Geoffrey, from Geoffrey to the long slip of white paper—the cause of all the mischief—that lay on the green baize table before his eyes. He pushed his hat well to the back of his head, scratched his grizzly locks, and obviously obtained some kind of mental inspiration, for at last he found words,—

'It is of no consequence at present, Mr Bagge. I'm much obliged to you all the same. And—a—you are quite certain of this'—flourishing the certificate—'being Mr Parry's signature?'

'Quite certain. You can compare it yourself. Hancock'—to a clerk,—'just reach down—'

'Never mind—not to-day—another time. Thank you; a—good morning. Come along, Geoffrey,' said the Honourable Mark, backing himself through a swing-door, and effecting his exit with extraordinary promptitude, leaving Mr Bagge under an impression that he had been visited by a gentleman who ought to be carefully looked after by his friends, if not immediately consigned to a lunatic asylum.

'It is a queer business, Geoff!' exclaimed Mr

Mayhew, once they found themselves in the street, 'a very queer business!' striding along at a tremendous pace, and looking very red in the face; 'but Reginald's sure to make it all right, you may take your oath of that. Just leave it to him to settle. He'll be back in a couple of days. Mind you don't miss the train—it's now a quarter-past five. Here's a hansom. Hop in, or you'll be late. Give Alice my love, and tell her it's all right; it will be all cleared up when Rex comes home. 'Waterloo,' to the driver.

'All very fine,' muttered Geoffrey to himself, as he was rattled over the pavement; 'I wish he had to face Miss Fane, with Bagge's opinion, instead of me. She'll get it out of me before she sleeps to-night, so I suppose I had better make a virtue of necessity, and tell the truth at once. Won't she just make a row!'

Alice having despatched Geoffrey, and seen him fairly off to the station, as fast as the fastest harness hack could take him, went up to her own room, and there read her husband's letter, from which her attention had been so rudely diverted. It was a nice letter for a young wife to get—not a spoony, love-lorn effusion, but a good, rational, amusing letter, that had evidently given as much pleasure to the writer to write, as to Alice to receive, and that, without fulsome extravagance, breathed a spirit of true, proud, tender love from the first page to the last. Till now, yesterday's had been to Alice the best and most precious of letters; now to-day's came to put it aside, and would in turn give place to to-morrow's, for the last was always the most prized.

Having read and re-read her letter, Alice felt a double reliance on her husband, and a sovereign contempt for the marriage certificate, which must be either someone else's or intended for a shameful hoax. Much emboldened and encouraged by these reflections, Alice ran downstairs in search of Miss

Fane, whom she found knitting in the morning-room, with an ominous purse on her lips and a frown on her brow.

She was sitting in the window, and merely raised her eyes for a second as Alice entered. Alice approached her, and, leaning against the window—with one hand in her pocket surreptitiously grasping her precious letter—plunged boldly into conversation.

'Miss Fane, I want to talk to you about this dreadful certificate. What do you think about it? For my own part, I most certainly will never believe that Reginald was ever married to anyone but me. It is some excessively bad joke that he and I will be laughing over together before the end of the week. Don't you think so?'

'My dear, if you have fully made up your mind, why ask me?' returned Miss Fane coldly.

'Because I have no one else to talk to about it. You are his aunt—his mother's sister. You would not believe such a thing of him, I know.'

Miss Fane drew in her lips and knitted faster and more fiercely than ever.

Alice, kneeling beside her, softly laid her hand on her arm and said, 'You know I have no mother to advise me, or think for me; and I am so dreadfully young, and foolish, even for my age. Don't you think, if my mother were alive, she would say, "Trust your husband"? In my heart I do sincerely trust him. Don't you?'

'Yes,' replied Miss Fane; and then, after a pause, added, 'that is to say, as much as *any* young man can be trusted. His mother was certainly my sister, but we were very little together, as I lived chiefly at my grandfather's. She was a handsome, headstrong girl. Reginald has his mother's eyes and his mother's temper, or I am much mistaken. You would not have found her very easy to get on with, had she been spared,' observed Miss Fane charitably; 'but she died,

poor thing, when she was two-and-twenty. My brother-in-law was inconsolable; he adored her, and spoiled her, and did the same for her son.'

'Do not say that, Miss Fane. If Reginald had been spoiled he could never have grown up as he has done—so good, so honourable, so—'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Miss Fane irritably. 'All brides of two or three months say the same.'

'There are very few like Reginald, nevertheless,' said Alice warmly. 'I know him, of course, better than anyone now.'

'Or you *think* you do,' interrupted Miss Fane, 'which comes to the same thing.'

'I *know* I do! I don't believe he has a thought that I might not share; he is true, upright, unselfish. Self he never thinks of; I am his first thought in everything. He loves me far too dearly to bring any such dreadful grief near me as this certificate hints at. I will put all thoughts of it out of my head till he comes home. Don't you think I am wise?' she asked, earnestly.

'Yes; in a certain sense you are; but if it is not cleared up you will be all the more unprepared to receive the shock. My motto is, "Prepare for the worst, hope for the best, and take what comes." This is a very serious matter, and requires serious thought. I have been turning it over in my mind for the last hour. Shall I tell you what I think?' gazing solemnly over her glasses at Alice, who was still kneeling at her side.

'Oh yes, of course. Please do,' she replied, eagerly.

'I think that you are by no means the first girl Reginald was in love with, or that was in love with him.'

'Oh, but I know I was,' cried Alice, with assured confidence; 'he told me so, over and over again,' she added, with a lovely blush.

'Stuff!' replied Miss Fane, viciously spearing

her ball of worsted with a knitting needle. 'And you believed him, you little goose! Do you think,' she proceeded, in a cool, ironical tone, 'that an extremely handsome young man like him has lived seven years in the army without as many love affairs to match? I tell you—and I am an experienced old woman—I tell you no, ten thousand times no. I can't say that. I ever heard of any special affair. I did hear a whisper that when he joined he was one of the wildest of wild boys; but I believe, thanks to his father, he soon steadied down. But take my word for it, young men in the cavalry are a wild, bad lot.'

'Do you mean — that — Reginald —' cried Alice, struggling to rise.

'No, no, *no*,' replied Miss Fane, keeping her down by laying her hand heavily on her shoulder. 'Be patient, and hear what I have to say. I only mean, taking them generally—no one in particular. Reginald,' she resumed, 'has spent a great deal of time abroad. Who knows,' she proceeded, mysteriously, and dropping her voice to a whisper, 'but he may in some mad moment have married a half-caste girl; and then, tired of her, and ashamed of his folly, have bribed her to silence and left her in India; and she, finding his second marriage too much for her fortitude, has sent you this certificate! What do you think of *that* idea?'

'Think of it!' cried Alice, jumping to her feet, and almost inarticulate with passion. 'I think it a very wicked, horrible idea to entertain of your own nephew, and you ought to be ashamed of it!'

'So I will, if this certificate proves a false one; but if not, have you thought, my poor girl, since I must speak plainly, of the position in which it places *you?*'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that if Reginald was married more than two years ago, as shown by the certificate,

you are not his wife; you are nothing but Miss Saville once more, with your name and fame for ever blighted.'

'How dare you say so!' cried Alice, crimson to the roots of her hair. 'How cruel, how unkind of you to talk to me like this! I will never, never speak to you again as long as I live. You have a bad, uncharitable heart,' she added, moving rapidly towards the door. 'What you say never, *never* could be true.'

'Stay, stay,' cried Miss Fane, following her briskly; 'I would not have said all this if I had not—if I did not *love* you, and if I had not altogether your good at heart. You surely do not think it can be pleasant for me to doubt my own nephew?'—but it was very pleasant—'I only want to open your eyes, my poor dear child, in case of the worst. There is no one to perform this very disagreeable, thankless duty, except myself. I mean all for the best, I do indeed,' taking Alice into her bony embrace and kissing her effusively.

Alice, on the verge of hysterics, her brain reeling, gladly escaped upstairs, to lock herself into her own room for the remainder of the day, where she had ample leisure to digest and understand Miss Fane's 'ideas.'

. . . . . .

Miss Fane, as we have already seen, had no love for her nephew, and as far as the certificate was concerned, he was already tried, found guilty, and condemned, in her opinion. A domestic tragedy such as this promised to be, was her glory and delight. Slander and gossip of all kinds were as the breath of her nostrils; her letters, thoughts, and conversation all turned in that direction; and she was an adept at serving up the most delicate dish of scandal, accompanied by sauce piquante, and followed by entrées of her own suggestions. She had the worst opinion of the world and every-

body in general, an opinion she prudently kept to herself. An affair in her own little circle, such as this was likely to be, would afford her materials for conversation and letters for an indefinite time. It would give her a certain importance, too, to say, 'I was in the house at the time when it all happened; I saw and heard everything with my own eyes and ears.'

She had no respect for her nephew's name—*she* was not a Fairfax—no pity for his young wife. The excitement of a *cause célèbre* in her family caused her neither shame nor horror; quite the reverse. She knitted the heel of a stocking; made an excellent lunch off fish cutlets, curried fowl, tarts, and cream; took an airing in the pony-carriage; and awaited Geoffrey's return with imperturbable mien.

'Alice would return to live with her,' she reflected, 'if this turned out as she imagined; and she would make her a handsome allowance, say three thousand pounds a-year, as before. Brighton or Cheltenham would suit her best; she loathed the country, and would be able to give nice little dinners, card-parties, and suppers, and keep a brougham and pair—bays or greys—iron-greys looked dashing; mulberry livery and silver buttons, and of course a cockade—it looked so smart. Perhaps a victoria, too, for summer.'

Here her castle-building was interrupted by the entrance of Alice, watch in hand—Alice, who had not tasted a morsel all day. She had spent hours alternately pacing the room and reading her husband's letter; at one moment revived with hope, at another sickening with despair, according as her own convictions or Miss Fane's came uppermost. Pale, but composed, she drew near the fire, and mechanically spread her hands towards the blaze. 'Have you dined yet, Miss Fane? I am very sorry to have left you alone, but really my

head ached so badly there was no use in coming down. Geoffrey will be here in ten minutes if the train is punctual.'

'Then in ten minutes you will know your fate,' said Miss Fane, laying her knitting down and looking at the clock.

'Oh, it's sure to be all right,' replied Alice bravely, but white as ashes to the very lips; as steadying herself by the mantelpiece, she kept her eyes fixed on the door.

Miss Fane's favourite motto, 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,' was suddenly curtailed by sounds in the hall.

Geoffrey's face, as he entered with a would-be cheerful look, spoke volumes, quite sufficient for Alice, who knew every expression of his familiar features. Her dry lips tried to form a question, but no sound came from them.

'Alice!' he abruptly blundered forth, 'they say it's a correct copy, and all that sort of thing. There is no use concealing the truth. Mark and I are certain that Reginald will clear it all up; it's some frightful mistake, but nothing more. I swear it is not,' he said, taking her icy cold hand. 'Don't you fret yourself about it,' he added, earnestly, for Alice's white face and stony fixed expression alarmed him not a little.

'A correct copy did you say?' screamed Miss Fane. 'Good heavens, what an unprincipled wretch Reginald must be! It's well his father and mother are in their graves. My *worst* fears are confirmed. Alice, my poor child,' turning towards her with outstretched hands, 'you will always have a friend and guardian in *me*.' But her future ward did not hear her; Alice was lying at Geoffrey's feet insensible.

. . . . . .

Next morning Alice had a long interview with Miss Fane, who came to condole and reason with her. She was in bed, and utterly at Miss Fane's

mercy. All her hopes were speedily nipped in the bud. Every loophole of excuse that during the night her busy brain had conjured up was speedily scattered to the winds by Miss Fane's common sense.

'There is no doubt about it *now*,' she urged; 'none whatever. You must brace up your courage and prepare to act as a girl of spirit. No doubt you have a terribly hard task before you, and you have been cruelly deceived; but for the honour of your sex—not to speak of your own good name—be firm. He will declare the whole thing a lie from first to last, and will try to soothe you down with fond words and caresses, so as to gain time to act; for doubtless this certificate will give him a very unpleasant surprise. He will spare no money, you may rest assured, to silence the other person—Fanny Cole, in short. I daresay he would bribe her with half his income, so as to keep you as his wife; but do not listen to him. Be firm; in fact, it will be best for you not to see him, but to leave the house before he arrives. You and I can live together as before. At first we will go to some quiet spot until this dreadful affair has blown over, as I suppose you will not wish to take any legal steps against him?'

'Oh, Miss Fane!' said Alice—who had not heard a quarter of what Miss Fane had been saying—suddenly sitting up in bed and pushing back her hair behind her ears, 'is it not a bad dream? Have I been a little off my head? It *can't* be true. It *is* a dream!' she said, administering a severe pinch to her round white arm, from which she had pulled back the lace-ruffled sleeve. But as she watched the vivid red mark slowly dying away, she fell back on her pillow with a gesture of despair. 'No dream—no dream,' she said, half to herself; nevertheless, Miss Fane heard it.

'I am sorry to say it is no dream, but a very sad

reality. If you will take my advice, Alice—' and here Miss Fane paused.

'Yes?'

'You will leave this to-day, and not await your hus—I mean,' correcting herself, 'Sir Reginald's return.'

'Oh, I can't, I won't. I must see him once more!' cried Alice excitedly. 'He is so clever, so clear-headed, he is *sure* to be able to unravel this horrible mystery.'

'Humph!' said Miss Fane, with a scornful sniff, 'it will take a cleverer man than I take him to be to do *that*. A marriage certificate is not to be explained away, or what would be the good of one?'

'But someone else may have forged his name,' persisted Alice; 'may have been married in his name two years ago.'

'They could hardly do that, as the chaplain must have known him by sight. And look at the chaplain's own signature, recognised and sworn to by his solicitors.'

'A forgery perhaps.'

'Nonsense. What could be anyone's object? What would they gain? If you will persist in shutting your eyes to plain facts, *I* cannot help you. I am certain he will declare the whole thing a falsehood, and talk you over, in which case I must warn you that all respectable society will drop your acquaintance. This is by no means the first event of the kind in *my* experience. The same terrible scandal occurred in the Loftus family only two years ago. Mr Rupert Loftus married one of the Darling girls, and shortly after the marriage another wife, married in Jersey years before, came on the scene. Quite a parallel case to yours. I must say I gave you credit for more self-respect than to imagine you would cling to a man who is another woman's husband.'

A crimson blush dyed Alice's throat, face, and

ears; indignant tears started to her eyes; she tried to speak, but no words came, and, turning her head, she buried her face in the pillow, motioning her tormentor away with her hand. Miss Vane, finding it impossible to carry on conversation with the back of a small shapely head and a huge coil of golden-brown plaits, took her knitting and her departure.

She went, but she left a shaft behind her that rankled deeply. 'Another woman's husband!' The thought was maddening! Not hers? Nothing to her any more; and he who had told her over and over again that he had never loved anyone but her. 'You little witch,' he had said, 'you made me break all my resolutions, for I had not meant to marry for years and years, and, thanks to you, find myself at five-and-twenty a married man, with the prettiest little wife in England.' How could he—how dared he talk like this, and he already married?

Towards the afternoon Alice submitted to be dressed, and took some tea and toast, but remained all day in her own room. She spent a long time sitting in one of the windows, with her hands listlessly crossed in her lap, and thinking profoundly. As she watched the grey rain drifting across the park, uppermost in her thoughts was Miss Fane's parting speech.

Over and over again her lips framed the unspoken words, 'Another woman's husband.'

She paced the room restlessly from end to end. Suddenly a thought struck her as she arrested herself at the door of her husband's dressing-room. She had never been in it. She slowly turned the lock of the door and entered. It corresponded in size to her own; but oh, how different to that luxurious apartment! It had a cold, unoccupied feel, as she walked across to the dressing-table on tiptoe, for some mysterious reason she could not have explained. There was a small photo of her-

self in a stand occupying a post of honour: a large old-fashioned prayer-book, which she opened—'Greville Fairfax, from his wife,' was written in a faded delicate Italian hand, on the first leaf; a familiar breast-pin was sticking in the pin-cushion; a familiar coat was hanging on a peg. How near he seemed to her now!

Her eyes, roving round the room, took in every detail. Two old-fashioned wardrobes, a battalion of boots, a bear-skin and two tiger-skins spread on the floor, a couch, a small brass-bound chest of drawers, and a few chairs. Over the chimney-piece hung his sabre, surmounting a fantastic arrangement of whips and pipes; the chimney-board itself bristled with spurs. Above the sabre, spurs, and whips was a small half-height portrait of his mother, evidently copied from one in the dining-room—a lovely dark-eyed girl, in a white satin dress and fur cloak. Alice stood before the picture for a long time.

Reginald had his mother's eyes, only that his had not such a soft expression. Yes, certainly his eyes were like his mother's.

'And what is it to me?' she thought, with a sudden pang. 'What would his mother think of him if she could but know?' she said, half aloud, fixing her eyes on the picture as if expecting an answer from those sweet red lips. 'What would *my* mother think if she knew all?' she said, burying her face in her hands. Then suddenly raising her eyes, she looked once more round the room and walked to the door.

'Good-bye,' she said aloud. 'Good-bye, the Reginald Fairfax I loved, that was everything to me in the wide world. Good-bye,' she repeated, softly shutting the door. 'As for the man who is coming to-morrow, he is nothing to me; he is—oh shameful, shameful thought!—another woman's husband!' and throwing herself on her knees

beside her bed, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

After a while she rose more composed, dried her eyes, stifled her long-drawn sobs with an enormous effort, and said to herself aloud,—

'I have done with tears; I have done with weakness! I have done with *Alice Fairfax!*'

CHAPTER VI.

'A WELCOME HOME.'

ENDUED in a decent semblance of composure, but pale and hollow-eyed, Alice came downstairs the following evening in time to receive her husband. She and Miss Fane and Geoffrey were sitting in the drawing-room, silent and constrained: Miss Fane bolt upright and knitting aggressively; Geoffrey making a feint of reading *The Field*, but in fact merely turning over the paper aimlessly from page to page, and surreptitiously watching Alice above its margin; Alice, with her hands clasped listlessly before her, making no pretence of any employment, but staring intently into the fire with a hard, defiant expression on her face. Suddenly a loud ring, and a sound of footsteps and cheerful voices in the hall, announced the return of the master of the house.

Sir Reginald entered, looking radiant. 'You hardly expected me so soon, did you?' he said, greeting his relations in turn. 'I travelled straight through without stopping, except for a couple of hours in Paris. I have brought you the most lovely Christmas-box you ever saw!' he said, turning to Alice.

'Why, what have you been doing to yourself, my dear girl?' he exclaimed, suddenly, struck by

her altered appearance. 'Have you been ill?' he asked, anxiously.'

'No,' she returned, shortly.

'Then what is the matter?' he proceeded, with a smile, inwardly amazed at his wife's strange manner, and at the tepid reception she had accorded him.

'Has the cook, our priceless treasure, given warning?'

'Something *dreadful* has happened, Reginald,' replied Alice. 'I don't know how to tell you,' she added, in a low voice.

'I know!' he returned, cheerfully, nodding his head towards Geoffrey. '*He* has killed one, if not two, of my best hunters?'

'Something far worse than that,' she rejoined, staring glassily at her husband.

'Can you not guess what it is?' put in Miss Fane with venomous *empressement*, having hitherto restrained herself by an enormous effort. 'I wonder the roof has not fallen on you,' she continued, invoking the chandelier with a supplicatory gesture and casting up her flint-grey eyes.

'Please leave us, Aunt Harriet,' interrupted Alice, struggling hard for composure. 'I must speak to —to—Reginald alone.' And turning her back to the company to conceal her emotion, she moved towards the fire.

Sir Reginald gazed from one to the other in speechless amazement, then walking to the door he flung it open for Miss Fane, who left the room with ill-disguised though stately reluctance, throwing a warning but wholly unnoticed glance towards the figure in front of the fire.

Geoffrey, as he passed out, significantly whispered, 'Mind, my dear fellow, I don't believe a word of it; I stand by *you*, through thick and thin.'

'Stand by me in what?' muttered Sir Reginald to himself, as he closed the door. 'Have they all gone mad?'

'Well, Alice, my darling,' approaching his wife, 'what is all this about?' putting his arm round her waist and drawing her towards him.

'Don't dare to touch me!' she cried, fiercely, pushing him away with both hands.

'Are you rehearsing for private theatricals?' he said, with a laugh; 'and am *I* to be the villain of the piece?' Then continuing more seriously, taking his wife's hands in his and looking straight into her eyes, 'Alice, tell me at once—what is the meaning of this?'

'I'll tell you,' she replied, hysterically, snatching her hands away and searching in her pocket with nervous haste.

'What is the meaning of this?' producing the anonymous letter. 'It came three days ago.'

He read it slowly, frowned, crushed it into a ball, and flung it into the fire.

'There! *that* is my opinion of it,' he said, turning towards her. 'You would not wish me to believe that you could be influenced by an anonymous letter, written by some crawling reptile too cowardly to attempt to substantiate his lies. I hold the writer of such a production' (pointing to the blackened fragments now lazily sailing up the chimney) 'no better than an assassin who stabs in the dark.'

'*This*, at any rate, is not anonymous,' replied Alice, pushing the certificate towards him.

He took it up, read it, turned it over, and read it again. She observed that his face was a shade paler, but otherwise he was perfectly composed, as he said, '*This* is a most infamous forgery. I know no one of the name of Fanny Cole, and I need hardly say I never was married before.'

'And is this *all* you have to say?' inquired his wife.

'All! Good heavens! Alice, what more can I say? I assure you most solemnly I was never married to anyone but you; you know it as well as

I do myself. I never met a woman I cared to speak to twice till I saw you that evening at Malta. What is the good of repeating the same old story over again—just now, at all events—when we have such heaps of things to say to each other? As to this infamous certificate, I will take good care to have it thoroughly investigated, and the whole thing cleared up, you may rely on that. It is my affair altogether; do not trouble your little head any more about it.' Drawing her towards him—'Come, are you not very glad to see me? Have you no better welcome for me than this? Do you know that I have been counting the very milestones till I reached home; and now I *am* here, won't you say you are glad to see me, my dearest?'

Alice leant her head against his shoulder; she was weak, she knew it; he was talking her over, as Miss Fane predicted; every word he uttered found an echo in her heart—her heart that was beating suffocatingly. She trembled from head to foot. On one hand was love and everything that made life dear to her; on the other, honour, duty, pride. She must make her choice between right and wrong.

'Speak, Alice!' interrupted her husband, getting a little out of patience at last.

'Yes, I'll speak,' she returned, in a hard mechanical voice, abruptly releasing herself and standing before him. 'Do you know,' she continued, with slow, distinct utterance, 'that that certificate' (pointing to where it lay on the table) 'has been shown to a firm of solicitors?'

'Indeed!' replied Sir Reginald, in a tone of much surprise. 'At whose suggestion?'

'Miss Fane advised me. Geoffrey and Mr Mayhew took it to a firm they could rely on.'

'Well, I really think you might all have waited for my return before taking such an important step,' said Sir Reginald, with some indignation. 'I wonder *you* allowed it, Alice. It did not show

much confidence in me, I must confess. And what did the solicitors say?' he proceeded, in a cool, displeased tone.

'They said—' and she paused; then continued with an effort—'they said it was a true copy,' raising her eyes to his.

'A true copy!' he echoed. 'I never heard such nonsense in all my life—*never!*' he exclaimed, emphatically. 'When there is no original, how can there be a copy?'

'I am not clever enough to argue with you, Reginald; you must ask the solicitors, they will explain. At any rate, they swore to the clergyman's signature; he was a client of theirs, and they knew his writing well.'

'Mr Parry's writing is it?' said her husband, again taking up the certificate and critically scanning it. 'So it is!—an admirable forgery. Poor old fellow, he was garrison chaplain at Cheetapore. I knew him well; he has been dead these two years.'

'Probably,' persisted Alice, 'the fact of his being dead does not refute *that*,' pointing to the paper in her husband's hand. 'According to its testimony it is nearly three years since you were married.'

'Three *months*, you mean!' he exclaimed, with a laugh, making a desperate effort to throw off a horrible suspicion that was stealing over him and turning every vein to ice.

'Someone has forged Mr Parry's name, that is evident!' he exclaimed; 'but why or wherefore I am at a loss to understand. I wish I had been here when this precious document arrived,' he continued, pacing about the room. 'It must have given you rather a start getting it in my absence. No wonder you look pale, my poor little wife,' he said, pausing opposite her and looking at her steadfastly.

'No wonder, indeed,' she replied, significantly.

Something in her look and tone confirmed his

former conviction. Gazing at her fixedly for some seconds, he said,—

'It is not possible that you doubt me, Alice?'

Dead silence.

'Answer me at once,' he demanded, sternly, as she stood dumb before him. 'Do you hear me, Lady Fairfax?' he persisted, exasperated by her silence.

'You can hardly expect *Lady Fairfax* to hear you,' she replied, in a cool, chilly voice. 'She is not here.'

'You will drive me mad, Alice!' he cried, vehemently; 'you could not in your heart believe this monstrous invention. I solemnly swear to you—you alone are my wife; you *know* it is the truth. Why do you torture me like this? If I thought you really doubted me, as sure as you are Alice Fairfax, I would never forgive you!'

'Then you are taking a very weak oath; for it seems to most people who have seen that paper say that *I* am not Alice Fairfax. Show it to whom you will, they will say that *I* am not your wife.'

'Is that *your* opinion?' he asked, sharply.

'It is,' she replied, boldly; 'I have no other alternative. I have been thinking a great deal the last two days—thinking more than I ever did in all my life before, and I can come to no other conclusion than that you *were* married to that woman. Your aunt entertains no doubt of your infamy, neither do I.'

'Alice, am I mad? am I dreaming? or do I really hear you distinctly tell me that you are no longer my wife, and that *you* entertain no doubt of *my* infamy? Am I out of my mind, or are you? Am I still asleep in the train, or am I in my waking senses?' he said, looking at her fixedly with his keen dark eyes.

'Whether you are mad or not I cannot say,' she retorted, scornfully. 'I hope you are sane enough

to understand that I leave this house to-morrow, never to return. For the future, you and I are *strangers.*'

'This is mere childish folly,' returned her husband angrily; 'you don't know *what* you are saying. Because Miss Fane has been wicked enough to put all manner of hideous ideas into your foolish head, you are ready to run away like the orthodox heroine of a three-volume novel. Do you suppose,' he continued, very gravely, 'that I shall permit you to take the law into your own hands like this, or suffer you—a girl in your teens, a three-months' wife—to leave your home in such a manner? Is *this* the way you keep your wedding vows—'

'Wedding vows!' interrupted Alice, hastily pulling off her ring and tossing it on the table, where it spun for a second, and then collapsed into silence. 'Wedding vows! I've none to keep! I am free! Show that certificate to whom you will, even to the most ignorant, and they will say, that whoever may be your wife—*I* am not—' She paused for a moment, half choked. 'And not being your wife, you can scarcely expect my father's daughter to remain *here.* You are a hypocrite!' she continued, speaking rapidly and trembling with excitement. 'A hypocrite! for you appeared to be all that was good; and I know you to be all that is bad— It *was* bad, wicked, shameful,' stamping her foot, 'to deceive an orphan confided to your care.'

She paused again, breathless.

'Pray go on, madam—do not spare me!' said her husband hoarsely. He was leaning one elbow on the chimney-piece. Indignation, horror, and scorn were chasing each other in his eyes.

'You married me,' resumed Alice, 'or rather *pretended* to marry me, because I was your ward. It was an easy way to solve *that* problem, which must otherwise have been a trouble and a bore. I was

young, rich, and, if *you* were to be believed, exceedingly pretty—nothing could be more suitable; but why did you forget that you had a wife in India? Had you not better bring her home? Her position may not be properly understood at Cheetapore,' with withering contempt.

Smash went a valuable, a priceless old chimney ornament, thanks to Sir Reginald's restless elbow.

'I shall go away to-morrow, say what you will, and never see you again as long as I live. You may hush the matter up; you may say that I am dead. You have nothing to fear from me. I have neither father nor brother. In years to come I may forget you, and I may forgive you; but should I live to be a hundred, I will never see you or speak to you again.'

She stopped abruptly, and looked at her husband with glowing, angry eyes. She had relieved the pent-up feelings of her heart in a perfect torrent of reproach. Her utterance was so rapid as to be almost inarticulate, and the tide of her passion carried all before it. With a motion to Sir Reginald to permit her to pass, she was preparing to leave the room.

He by this time was as white as a sheet, otherwise a vein down the centre of his forehead alone betrayed emotion.

Whilst Alice was shaking with excitement, he was perfectly cool and self-possessed; but a kind of repressed sound in his voice when he spoke would have told a bystander that his temper was now thoroughly roused, and that *he* was by far the more incensed of the two.

'Lady Fairfax,' he said, with emphatic distinctness, 'permit me to delay you for one moment,' interposing himself between her and the door. 'I quite enter into your wishes. The sooner we part the better. I will have no wife who suspects and despises me. A woman holding such views of my character I have no desire to see again. A wife

who is ready to cast me off on the smallest and most unfounded suspicion—who does not even grant me a chance of proving my innocence—but tries, convicts, and condemns me unheard, is no wife for *me* except in name. I shall make all arrangements for your comfort, but I cannot bring myself to discuss them now. You can remain here till our future plans are arranged. Your father's daughter occupies the same position beneath this roof as did my mother, although you may pretend to think otherwise. Had I been as wise a year ago as I am *now*, your father's daughter would never have been my *wife*.'

Taking up the certificate and the ring, he turned and walked out of the room without another word.

On his way across the hall he was waylaid by Geoffrey, who sprang on him from the billiard-room and seized him by the arm, saying,—

'Well, Rex, I suppose she has told you?'

'She has,' replied Reginald, shaking him off impatiently as he entered the library and threw himself into an arm-chair.

'I don't believe one word of it, mind you, Rex; and as for Alice, she is nothing but a silly girl with a hot temper. It all blows over. I know her rages well,' he added, consolingly.

'Don't talk to me now, there's a good fellow' returned Sir Reginald, jumping up and pacing the room. 'Run down and tell them to bring round "Dragon" and the dog-cart, and to put in my portmanteau just as it came.'

'Why so, in the name of all that's mad?'

'I'm off to London by the mail.'

'Are you in your sober senses, Reginald?' exclaimed Geoffrey, looking at him aghast.

'I scarcely know,' he returned, wearily, passing his hand across his forehead; 'but I am quite certain of one thing, and that is, that Alice and I have parted for ever.'

CHAPTER VII.

WESSEX GARDENS.

IT is needless to say that all this excitement upstairs had created no small stir in the lower regions. The servants held a court of inquiry on it over their meals, and discussed the subject in all its bearings and from every point of view. Susan Parker, lady's-maid, examined, and gave evidence that on Tuesday night she was called to her lady, who was in a dead faint in the drawing-room; that the two following days she had kept her room, refusing to eat or drink, save a very little toast or tea; and that she sat all day long looking as if she was crazed, with her hands clasped idly before her, and that she, Susan, had surprised her more than once reading a letter and crying bitterly.

John Scott, groom, gave evidence that by order of Markham, the coachman, he had driven the dog-cart over to meet his master by the eight-o'clock down train. That Sir Reginald was never in better spirits in his life, asked him how they were all at home, talked of going to the meet at Copperley Gate next day, and drove along at his usual spanking pace, smoking a cheroot, as happy as you please.

That an hour after they got home, as he was at his supper in the servants' hall, Mr Geoffrey had come down and beckoned him out, and told him to be ready with the dog-cart in ten minutes, as Sir Reginald was going up by the mail. That when he was ready at the side door, his master had come out, shaken hands with Mr Geoffrey, and driven away as if the Old Boy himself was after him.

They were just in time for the train, and Sir Reginald jumped out and tore off, leaving his portmanteau and rug behind him.

It was agreed on all hands that there had been an awful row between Sir Reginald and Lady Fairfax, but they were obliged to return a verdict of 'Cause not known.'

The following morning Reginald called at the Mayhews' and found them at breakfast.

'By Jove! my dear fellow, how seedy you look!' exclaimed the Honourable Mark. 'I suppose you had it roughish in the Channel?'

'No; I arrived yesterday, and went straight to Looton.'

'Then you had it roughish there instead,' remarked Mr Mayhew, with a grin.

'Mark, I have come to speak to you about this,' said he, producing the certificate and handing it over to him. 'You don't believe it, do you?' he asked, anxiously.

'Not I; no more than if it were myself,' said Mr Mayhew, pausing in the act of voraciously devouring a grill. 'I stand by you, Rex.'

'And you, Helen?'

'And I also, Reggy. Although appearances are against you, I believe in you firmly. You need not have asked,' she added, sipping her tea and speaking between every sip.

'I really wish you would sit down and have some breakfast instead of standing on the rug in that uncomfortable way. Have a cup of tea at any rate, and we'll talk it over together.'

Her woman's heart was touched by his haggard, wan face. He looked as if he had not slept for nights, and although his 'get up' was as studiously correct as ever, there was a careless, reckless air about him that half frightened her. He looked like a man on the brink of a brain fever.

'Nothing for me, thank you. If I were to swallow a morsel it would choke me just now. I need not assure you, Mark and Helen, that the certificate is a most wicked forgery. I never heard of, much

less married, Fanny Cole, nor anyone but Alice Saville. I must unwittingly have made some bitter enemy to bring down on myself such diabolical vengeance, uprooting my home and estranging my wife.'

'Alice believes it then?' they cried in one breath.

'Yes, so she has told me. She declares she is no longer my wife, and will never see me again. She means to leave Looton and live in remote retirement with Miss Fane, where, reversing the Elizabethan valediction, she will do her best to forgive and forget me.'

'Reginald!' said Helen, with wide-open eyes, 'you are joking.'

'Do you think this a subject for jests?' he said, sternly.

'Did you not reason with her?' asked his cousin vehemently.

'I did; I assured her of my innocence, on my word of honour. I reasoned with her as temperately as I could, till she nearly goaded me to madness. I could not trust myself to tell you what she said; but she concluded the interview by flinging me her wedding-ring. Here it is,' said he, taking it out of his waistcoat-pocket and laying it on the table between them.

At this tangible proof of the rupture they both stared in silent consternation. Presently Helen said,—

'I need not tell you, Regy, how young and inexperienced she is—not yet eighteen. Make allowances for her, for she naturally received a great shock, and has been ill-advised by Miss Fane, whom, you know, I never could bear. Do not be hasty in taking Alice at her word; you know she is very fond of you.'

'If you had been present last night you would scarcely have said so,' returned Sir Reginald, dryly; 'but I have written to her this morning to say that,

if she changes her mind, a line to the Club will find me for a week. She may have been carried away in the heat of passion to say more than she thought or meant. After a week it will be too late; I shall accept the liberty she offers me, and return to my profession. Fortunately my papers have not gone in yet. Now I must be going. You shall see me this day week.'

'Nonsense, man, you are coming to stay here.'

'No, Mark; many thanks to you. You would find me a restless, unbearable inmate. In a week's time I shall have settled down and grown more accustomed to my fate—if fate it is to be. Meanwhile, I shall spare neither time nor money to find out the author of this certificate, scoundrel that he is!'

'Reginald, I am sure a man never sent it,' said Helen. 'I'm sorry to say it of my own sex, but it's safe to be a woman.'

'My dear Helen, if you knew how very small my circle of lady acquaintances in India was, you would not say so. I don't think so badly of your sex. Good-bye.'

The allotted week having elapsed, Sir Reginald found himself once more in Wessex Gardens, this time to dinner. He was no longer the pale, half-distracted man we had last seen him. He looked quiet and self-possessed, as if his fate had overtaken him, and he had submitted to it without a struggle. There had been no letter from Alice; his plans were fully formed, and he would unfold them after dinner—this much he imparted to Helen as he escorted her downstairs.

During dessert the children came in—Hilda, aged six, and Norman, eight—both delighted to see their special favourite, Uncle Regy. But Uncle Regy was very slow this evening—no stories, no paper boats, no rabbits on the wall. True, he took Hilda on his knee, gave her all his grapes, cracked walnuts

for her, with the reckless profusion of a young man, not an experienced paterfamilias, and finally carried her up to bed. But even the children could see that something was amiss, and told their nurse that Uncle Regy never laughed nor showed his nice white teeth once, and they thought he must be sick, he looked so solemn.

'Now,' said Helen, as she poured out coffee, 'let us have it all. What have you been doing, Regy? —and what are you going to do?'

'I have placed the certificate in the hands of a first-rate detective, for one thing; I have written to the chaplain at Cheetapore; and I have effected an exchange from the Fifth to the Seventeenth Hussars —now in India—and go out with drafts early in February.'

'Oh! Regy, to India again so soon?' said Helen, with tears in her eyes.

'Yes,' affecting not to observe them. 'Is it not a good thing now I have the Service to fall back on? After all, India is not half a bad place for soldiering, and we are sure to have a row out there ere long.'

'But why leave this country? Why not stay at home?'

'Because it will the more effectually muzzle Mrs Grundy. It will be less marked than if Alice and I both lived in England and kept up separate establishments.'

'But *would* you?' asked Helen, in an awe-struck tone.

'Certainly. Alice has stood to her guns, and as "Trust me all in all, or not at all," is my motto, we should never get on. As a married couple our career is finished. I remember hearing a cynical old bachelor say that the marriage service, instead of being the prelude to happiness and harmony, was almost always the ceremony that inaugurated a long and arduous campaign, a series of skirmishes, varied

with numerous pitched battles. Alice and I have had one desperate engagement, and both vacate the field. We live to fight another day, but not with each other! Our married life was a short one—barely four months—and I find myself once more a bachelor; for as Alice declares she is not my wife, and as I equally solemnly declare that the other is not my wife, I conclude I am single. What do *you* think, Helen?'

'I think you are talking a great deal of nonsense, my dear Regy, and though you rail at matrimony *now*, in your heart you know very well that the last four months were the happiest of your life. You need not deny it, and if you did it would be useless. Go on,' waving her fan imperiously, 'go on; tell me what you are going to do about Alice.'

'Of course she must bear my name, and live in my house, but that will be the only tie between us. Unfortunately I am her guardian, a post I would willingly relinquish; but it is out of the question to do so. However, my solicitor will manage to represent me as much as possible. I do not intend to be brought personally into contact with Alice, much less with Miss Fane, who has fanned the flame with all her might, Geoffrey tells me.'

'And how have you managed?'

'I have opened an account in Alice's name at Drummond's, and made her an allowance of five thousand a-year. Her own money she cannot touch till she is one-and-twenty, excepting five hundred a-year, which her father very wisely thought ample for a girl in her teens.'

'Then why increase it?'

'My dear Helen, where is your common sense? Alice will have an establishment to keep up befitting her position as a married woman. I intend her to live at Monkswood, which has always been a kind of dower house. I shall shut up Looton, dismiss most of the servants, and send all the horses up to

Tattersall's on Saturday. I am going abroad for a month previous to returning to India, and start for Vienna the day after to-morrow. Now, I think I have told you all my plans ; have you any exception to take to them ?' he inquired, drinking off his coffee and setting down his cup.

'I know you of old, Regy,' replied Mrs Mayhew, with a sigh. 'Your asking me if I take exception to any of your arrangements is only a Chinese compliment ; once you make up your mind nothing will alter it, so there is no use wasting words. *I* think you ought to stay at home instead of going to India. *I* think you ought to insist on bringing Alice to her senses ; or suppose you allow *me* to take her in hand ? Let her come here on a visit whilst you go out to Cheetapore and investigate this horrid business thoroughly.'

'No,' replied Reginald coldly ; 'Alice and I are strangers for the future. You will oblige me very much, Helen, by referring to her as seldom as possible. She thinks me a hypocrite, a deceiver, a thoroughly bad man. Such were her own words. She could not think worse of me if I were the greatest scoundrel that ever walked this earth.'

'Reginald, I am sure she does not,' pleaded Helen.

It was in vain she begged him to reconsider his decision. He listened to all she had to say with a kind of contemptuous tolerance.

'Very kind of you, Helen, to take her part in this way ; very good of you to defend her ; but, as you yourself remarked just now, it is only a waste of words.'

One has a good opportunity of studying Sir Reginald Fairfax as he stands on the rug looking down on Mrs Mayhew, who, leaning back in the easiest of chairs, is slowly fanning herself.

Tall, slender, and graceful, his well-cut evening clothes fit him and suit him admirably. 'Gentleman' is stamped on every line and lineament, and

there is a leisurely ease and deliberation about everything he says and does; the repose that stamped the line of 'Vere de Vere' is not wanting in the Fairfax family. His eyes are the most striking feature—so dark, so cool, so keen, they seem to read one's thoughts like a book, to penetrate one through and through. His delicately-chiselled high-bred nose (to particularise each feature impartially) and proud sensitive nostrils he inherits from a long line of ancestors. Do not dozens of similar profiles adorn the walls of the gallery at Looton? There is a certain look about his well-cut lips—barely to be guessed at beneath his dark moustache—that to a close observer indicates a resolute, not to say imperious, disposition; and something altogether intangible in his bearing points out the soldier—a handsome, dark, daring face one could easily imagine leading the headlong hurricane of a cavalry charge.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS MAYHEW'S LITTLE SCHEME.

MRS MAYHEW was most decidedly the clever woman of the family. Not only had she brains, but an unusual allowance of common sense, and a kind heart to boot. She was dark and good-looking, like most of the Fairfaxes, and inherited no small share of their force of character and determination. Having no brother of her own, she had always appropriated her cousin Reginald as such, since he, at the ripe age of six, had made impassioned love to her, a grown-up young lady of seventeen. She absolutely ruled all the men of her family (husband included) with a mild and gracious sway, always with the notable exception of her cousin 'Regy.' His head had never yet bent under her

we all know she is in the wrong. It's a bad business—a bad business.'

So saying, he opened his paper with an impressive rustle and buried himself in the news of the day.

. . . . . .

A fortnight had passed. The Mayhews were domiciled at Southsea, and Alice had come over to stay with them for a few days after an immense amount of coaxing, and finally being 'fetched.' She was as deaf as an adder to all Helen's eloquent reasoning and remonstrances, and even Mark was out of patience with her at last. She had been primed by Miss Fane with answers to every argument, and had given her her most solemn promise never to yield an inch until the certificate was thoroughly disproved. There had been a letter from her husband to Helen, saying he was coming down on Monday to bid 'Good-bye,' as he was to sail the following Thursday; and he mentioned that he wished to have an interview with his wife, so that her being on a visit at the Mayhews' was most convenient. She was not told of his probable arrival, in case it should scare her away. She knew that he was shortly going to India, but where he was, or when he was going, she had no means of knowing, and was too proud to ask, and Helen was far too angry with her to offer any gratuitous information.

On Monday afternoon, Helen and Alice were sitting in the drawing-room, the latter pouring out tea at a low gipsy table, and looking very fair, girlish, and lovely in a thick black damassé silk of most artistic cut, with lace ruffles at her throat and wrists. Helen, lounging opposite in a capacious arm-chair, was reading aloud tit-bits from *The World*, and occasionally glancing towards the door.

Norman and Hilda, with scrambling feet and buttered fingers, were making Alice's life a burden to her; and she was by no means so tolerant of

these young aggravations as her husband would have been.

'More sugar; more sugar, Alice!' cried Norman, passing a very sloppy cup recklessly towards her.

'No, my dear Norman; I gave you two lumps.'

'Give me another two, for I have fished them out and eaten them. Come, look sharp!'

'Norman!'

'If you don't I'll take that arrow out of your hair and pull it all down, and you'll see how nice you'll look if visitors come.'

'If you do—' began Alice indignantly. Just at this crisis the door opened and admitted Mark, Geoffrey, and Reginald.

The children made a violent charge towards the latter.

'Uncle Regy, Uncle Regy! where have you been all this long time? What have you brought us?' they cried, leaping and dancing expectantly round him.

Alice glanced up hastily. He was shaking hands with Helen. What was she to do? Would he shake hands with her? Yes; in another second she found her hand in his; and then he turned to the children.

'Give me a cup of tea, Alice,' said Geoffrey, drawing a chair close to the tea-table, and staring at her with a very unpleasant critical scrutiny.

Her hands trembled so violently she could hardly hold the teapot; the colour sank from her cheeks, and her heart beat so fast it seemed as if it would choke her; but she made a brave struggle for self-command, and endeavoured to converse easily and indifferently with Geoffrey whilst her husband was talking to Helen. Presently she stole a look at him; he was standing on his favourite place—the rug—and she met point-blank the steady glance of her keen dark eyes fixed on herself—a look full of interest, yet grave and stern.

She felt her face becoming crimson, and dived under the table for her handkerchief, glad of an opportunity of composing her countenance. Dare she take another look? No, she dare not.

At this moment visitors were announced, and the bustle consequent on their arrival was the greatest relief.

Enter two fashionable ladies, with a cavalier in tow. Reginald evidently found favour in the eyes of one of them; he had the unmistakable air of a man of birth and distinction. She therefore proceeded to make herself most agreeable, and put him through a series of animated questions, giving him a pretty good benefit of her eyes all the time. Alice, looking on, felt indignation burn within her; and yet, why should she mind? he was nothing to her! He had destroyed her life, as far as her happiness went. All she valued was gone. Bravely indeed did she try to sustain a share in the conversation, and to keep up appearances to the best of her ability. She knew she was answering the strange young man's remarks at random, but she could not help it. He was looking intensely puzzled, as well he might, when she told him that she was 'staying in *India*, but had come over to Southsea for two or three days.' Oh, if she could only get out of the room! No sooner thought than done. She was gliding quietly towards the door, when her husband with two steps confronted her.

'Alice,' said he, 'I wish to speak to you particularly. Can you come out with me and take a turn on the pier?'

Alice bowed her head in assent, and passed on. When she came down in her walking things—close-fitting velvet paletôt trimmed with superb sable, and cap to match—she found him waiting in the hall. Having ceremoniously opened the door for her, they set out, and walked on rapidly, exchanging the veriest commonplaces. The pier was

evidently to be the scene of action, so Alice braced up all her nerve for the encounter, and firmly determined to abide by Miss Fane's advice, and not yield an inch till the certificate was utterly refuted.

No one meeting them would have guessed at the storm that was raging in their hearts. They did not look like married people nor lovers, certainly. 'A young fellow taking his very pretty sister for a walk, most likely,' would have been the verdict of a passer-by.

Arrived at the pier, Alice summoned up all her courage, and, taking a good long breath and a firm grasp of her umbrella, said, with apparent composure,—

'Now, what have you to say to me?'

'Several things as your husband, and a few as your guardian,' he replied, leaning against the railing and looking at her intently.

'Say nothing to me as my husband, but whatever you have to say as my guardian I will perhaps attend to.'

'Then you still entertain the monstrous notion—that I am *not* your husband?' To this question Alice made no reply, and he proceeded. 'Well, I *am*, all the same. But I see it would be a waste of time and temper to endeavour to persuade you otherwise. I have every reason to believe that within the next two months all will be satisfactorily cleared up. May I ask what you will do in that case?'

'I will return to you as your wife, of course,' she replied, calmly.

'And do you suppose that I will receive you then? Return to me *now*—show, even at the eleventh hour, that you can trust me—I will send in my papers and stay at home. I have interest, and it is not yet too late. I will freely forgive and forget all you thought, all you said. It shall be as though it had never been spoken.' He paused and looked at her eagerly. 'I told you,' he proceede d

still more earnestly, 'that I had done with you, that I had no desire to see you again, but I found, on cool reflection, that I loved you far too dearly to give you up without an effort at reconciliation. I have made *two* once in London and once now—but this, I declare to you solemnly, will be the last. Come back to me and trust me, my dearest,' he said, laying his hand entreatingly on her arm. 'Trust me only for a little time; all will, all must come right. You will never again in all your life have such an opportunity of showing your love, your confidence in me. Do you think I would not stand by you in a similar case? You *know* I would,' he added, emphatically. 'Come back to me, Alice,' he urged.

'No, I will not,' she replied, doggedly, leaning both elbows on the railing of the pier and staring steadily out to sea.

'You will not?' he repeated, in a tone of bitter disappointment. 'You cannot mean it!' After an inward struggle with himself, he continued as before,—'Think of what you are doing, Alice. You have broken up our home and turned me adrift—taken your freedom and your own way. You are sending me back to India, and God knows if I shall ever return.'

'You need not go,' she replied, in a low voice, still looking out to sea, as if addressing the ocean.

'Of course I must go!' he cried, emphatically; 'unless you wish to have the open mouth of scandal busy with our names. If the world knows that I am engaged in my country's service it may leave you alone. But I warn you that society looks coldly on a young and pretty woman living apart from her husband, and, rightly or wrongly, they almost always throw the blame of the separation on *her* shoulders. I know you have been influenced by Miss Fane; I know you have. It was not my generous, true-hearted Alice that spoke to

me that night at Looton. You don't know how you pained me, how you nearly maddened me by some of the things she put into your mouth—things my pure-minded girl-wife would never have thought of herself. You could not seriously think that I had another wife living, and that I had dared, nevertheless, to marry you—an *orphan*, as you justly remarked, committed to my care! Think of the shameful crime it would be! Look me full in the face, and tell me candidly, truthfully, and of your own free will, whether you imagine that I, Reginald Fairfax, could be guilty of such a thing?'

Alice turned round at once and confronted him—his face pale with emotion. His dark, miserable eyes haunted her painfully afterwards for many and many a day.

'Clear yourself first,' she exclaimed, 'then I will listen to you! As long as that certificate is unexplained I will never return to you as your wife; I will never, never see you again, as far as I can help it until the whole affair is refuted. I am amazed that you should expect it.'

Sir Reginald gazed incredulously at his wife for a moment, as if he thought that his ears must have deceived him.

'Is this your last word?' he said, in a voice husky with passion.

She nodded emphatically.

Exasperated beyond endurance, he left her side and walked to the other end of the pier alone. Presently he returned with firm rapid strides, and confronted her with a compression of the lips and a flash in his eyes she had never seen before. Coming one step and standing directly before her, he said,—

'That was *your* last word; now hear *mine*. I most solemnly take God to witness'—raising his hat as he spoke—'that I will never receive you back as my wife until you have made the most

humble, abject apology that ever came from woman's lips. You shall abase yourself to the very dust for the shameful injustice you have done *me*.'

'Shall I, indeed?' she exclaimed, passionately. 'You will never see a Saville abased to the dust. I will never apologise and never beg your pardon. Pray do not *offer* your forgiveness before it is required.'

'Very well,' he replied, coldly, 'there is no more to be said, as you declare that you will never apologise, and I have sworn to yield to no other terms. We shall live for the future as strangers, excepting that I shall exercise over you—even though at a distance—the authority of your guardian till you are twenty-five.'

'I shall not submit to your authority!' she interrupted, hotly.

'Oh yes, you will,' he returned, in a cool, unmoved tone. 'You have as yet to learn that I too have a will—that I am your master—no longer your slave. I am aware I cannot flatter myself that you either love or honour me,' with ironical emphasis, 'but you will certainly *obey* me.'

'I shall *not*!' she cried, indignantly.

'Oh yes, I am quite sure you will,' he replied, in the easy, authoritative tone with which one talks to a naughty child. 'You will live at Monkswood,' he proceeded, tranquilly. 'It is smaller than Looton, but I hope you will find it as comfortable. Horses, carriages, and servants will precede you there, and I hope all will be ready for your reception in a fortnight's time. In the meanwhile, I must beg you will remain with Helen, as I do not wish you to return to Miss Fane. I forbid you to see her or to correspond with her.' He paused to see the effect of his words, then continued, 'Your own aunt, Miss Saville, has been good enough to promise to reside with you permanently, as it would be out of the question for you to live alone.'

During the above long speech Alice had been gazing at her husband with amazed, indignant eyes. Drawing herself up as he concluded, she said,—

'And supposing I decline to leave Miss Fane and to go to Monkswood, what are to be the dire consequences?'

'You have no other alternative,' he replied, with freezing politeness. 'Unfortunately for your independent spirit, all your money is in my hands.'

'What a shame!' she cried, passionately.

'Yes, is it not?' he answered, with a satirical smile. 'A young lady with an empty purse, and already cut off from her friends, would find herself rather embarrassed, to say the least of it.'

'Miss Fane will allow me to live with her as before,' she returned, confidently.

'When she finds that you are absolutely penniless, I think you will discover that her interest in you has ceased,' he replied, significantly.

'Must I go to Monkswood? Must I?' she asked, passionately.

A bow was her reply.

'I suppose I am completely in your power?'

'I am afraid so,' he answered, composedly.

'Oh, if anyone else were only my guardian! If your father had lived, or if he had chosen Mr Mayhew!'

'I sincerely echo both your wishes, but I hope you will be able to reconcile yourself to circumstances. You will go to Monkswood, I am sure.'

'I suppose I *must*—for a time at least,' looking at him defiantly.

'Very well,' he replied, ignoring her look, 'we will consider the matter settled. Mark Mayhew and my solicitors will look after your interests. For really, I will have no communication with you. This is our last interview; from to-day we are strangers.' At a pause he went on, 'You will hear from them whether I am dead or alive; if

the former, you will be freed from every tie ... you will be your own mistress, an exceedingly wealthy widow, with no one to control you in any way. Should you marry again, as no doubt you will, sincerely hope your second venture in matrimony will be more fortunate than your first.'

'Reginald!' she exclaimed, indignantly.

'He will have to be a different sort of fellow to me,' he continued, without noticing the interruption; 'to have a pretty thick skin; to give you your own way completely; and to have no self-respect whatever. Of course *that* will be a *sine qua non*. He must not mind your changeful moods, nor be offended, if after telling him he is dearer to you than words can express, and making an utter fool of him, you turn on him at the first breath of suspicion and call him a hypocrite, a deceiver, a ruffian of the deepest dye, and altogether a most infernal scoundrel.'

'Reginald, I never used such expressions. How *dare* you speak to me in such a way! How dare you treat me so!' she exclaimed, raising her voice, much to the amusement of two sailors, the only other people on the pier, who were lolling over the railings close by, and had been watching the scene with unaffected delight.

'She's giving it to him. By Jove! Bill, that chap has his hands full!' said one of them, twirling his quid. 'If he is going to venture out on the sea of matrimony with that craft, he'll happen to have heavy weather and frequent squalls every day.'

'What do you mean by bringing me here to ridicule and insult me?' repeated Alice, in a towering rage. 'The marriage certificate is still unexplained, and you talk to me as if *you* were the injured person—*you!*'

'I am glad to see that you have grasped my meaning,' he replied, coolly. 'I *am* the injured person, suspected by you, who should be the last to

...me—homeless, wifeless, nevertheless innocent. ...leaving my native land, this time a voluntary ...e. You have destroyed my faith in woman-...nd: a woman's word—a woman's love—a woman's generosity are to me *now* merely so many names ...for delusions believed in by children and fools. I brought you here to tell you of various arrangements I had made. I preferred a personal interview to letter-writing; besides which, I am sure you will be amused to hear that I had a lingering hope you would have believed me and trusted me, even at the eleventh hour—a hope I now see,' looking at her steadily, 'that I was mad to entertain.'

'You were indeed insane to think it!' exclaimed Alice, very emphatically. 'Prove the certificate to be a forgery, and then I will believe you,' she said, abruptly, turning to leave the pier, with a scarlet flush on either cheek and a general air of outraged dignity.

They walked homewards, that cold, dusky February evening, in solemn silence. Alice's conscience was clamouring loudly as she stepped briskly along, endeavouring to keep up with her husband's rapid strides. He seemed totally unconscious of her presence. Buried deep in his own thoughts, he did not vouchsafe a single remark between the pier and the Mayhews' house.

'God forgive you if you have wronged him,' said Alice's inward monitor. 'He is going away to the other end of the world, and you may never see him again.'

'But the certificate—the clergyman's signature so far undenied and unrefuted,' argued Pride and Propriety.

Helen, who had been expecting great things from this interview, met her cousins in the hall on their return. One glance at Alice was sufficient to dash her hopes to the ground—she looked the very picture of frigid reserve as she placed her umbrella in

the stand, and with some trivial remark about the lateness of the hour walked straight upstairs to her own room, where she remained all the evening, pleading a bad headache as an excuse from dinner. Nor was her husband a more hopeful subject; declining all his cousin's entreaties and persuasions to remain, at any rate, till the last train, he took his departure forthwith, Helen promising him, as she followed him to the door, that they would *all* come and see him off the following Thursday. Her inquiries and hints were in vain; no particulars of the walk to the pier were vouchsafed to satisfy the cravings of her curiosity. 'We are just where we were before we ever met—we are strangers,' was the only intelligence gleaned from her cousin, as he selected a cigar, buttoned up his top-coat, and bade her good-night.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM.

THE day of embarkation arrived only too speedily. It was a persistently pouring wet morning, rain descending in torrents. It cleared a little towards the afternoon, and the Mayhews, accompanied by Alice, started in a close carriage for Portsmouth Dockyard. They had insisted on her accompanying them, saying that, if she did not, it would give rise to a great deal of unpleasant discussion among their friends, several of whom lived at Southsea.

'It is only fair to Reginald,' urged Helen. 'He has not had time to clear himself yet, and at any rate before the *world* you will have to keep up appearances. How you can allow him to go—how you can doubt him, I cannot imagine. You will be exceedingly sorry for yourself some day,' she

added, in a lower voice, accompanied by a look of keen-edged meaning quite lost upon Alice, who was staring vacantly out of the window.

They soon arrived at The Hard, Portsea, and descried the huge white *Alligator* lying alongside. The most frightful confusion prevailed on all sides, and the noise and din and pushing and shoving were beyond description. Baggage bewailed as lost; baggage going on board; soldiers' wives, who were being left behind, in loud lamentation: friends who came to see people off, rather cheery and important than otherwise; friends who were really sorry, and on the verge of tears; dogs being smuggled on board; dogs being turned out; wherever you looked there was bustle and confusion! The Mayhew party gingerly ascended the long and slippery gangway, and asked for Sir Reginald Fairfax.

'Yes, he is below, God bless him!' said an Irishwoman, who was wiping her eyes with the tail of her dress. 'It's many a sore heart he has lightened this day.'

'How so?' inquired Mrs Mayhew graciously.

'Hasn't he given ten pounds to every woman that's not on the strength, and is left behind, meeself among them—and me wid three childer? May the heavens be his bed! may he never know sickness or grief! May he never know what it is to have as sore a heart as mine is this day! May the Holy Virgin protect him!'

It was in vain they tried to stem this torrent of blessings; the woman would not let them out of her sight.

Addressing herself specially to Alice, she said,—

'Maybe you're his sweetheart, or his sister, alannah! His sweetheart, I'm sure?' she urged, insinuatingly.

'No, neither,' replied Alice, blushing furiously, and making a wild and at last effectual effort to

reach the top of the saloon stairs, leaving the Irishwoman still pouring benedictions on her husband's head.

The long saloon was full of artillery, cavalry, and infantry officers and their friends, but Reginald was not there after all; so, under the escort of a polite naval officer, they again went on deck, where they found him in the fore part of the ship, giving orders to a smart, saucy-looking sergeant, with his cap on three hairs, who was receiving his directions with many a 'Yes, sir; very well, sir.'

Sir Reginald was now junior major in the Seventeenth Hussars, and uncommonly well he looked in his new uniform. He received Mark and Helen warmly, Alice politely, and as though she were some young lady friend of Helen's, and nothing more.

He offered to show them over the ship, now they were there, and took them between decks, pointed out the soldiers' quarters, the live stock, the engines, etc. Alice, under convoy of the naval officer, walked behind her husband and the Mayhews, but her mind was in far too great a ferment to notice or admire the order, discipline, spotlessness of the magnificent trooper.

She answered her exceedingly smart escort utterly at random as she mechanically picked her steps along the wet decks, the said young sailor thinking her the prettiest girl he had seen for many a day, and that her feet and ankles were the most unexceptionable he had ever come across. He made a mental note to find out who she was and all about her.

As they passed a group of weeping women, he remarked,—'They may well cry, poor creatures, for many a fine fellow will sail to-day that will never see his native land again.'

'Oh, please don't say that,' said Alice, her eyes filling with tears.

'Why not? Are you very much interested in

anyone on board?' he asked, with a smile meant to be tender and captivating.

'My husband,' she faltered.

'Your husband!' he cried, thunderstruck. 'Are you married—you look so awfully young? Is that your husband—that young hussar fellow ahead with your friends?'

Alice, whose tears were now quietly coursing down her cheeks, turned and leant over the side in silence.

'Is he?' he repeated.

She nodded impatiently, still further averting her face.

'Oh, but a strong-looking fellow like that is sure to come back all right,' said he, offering her the first piece of clumsy comfort that came into his head, and much distressed at the flow of tears that kept drip, drip, dripping into the sea.

'By Jove!' he thought, 'what an odd couple they are! They have never spoken to each other yet, for all this grief.'

Meanwhile the Mayhews and Reginald had turned and come back towards them, and were much edified to find Alice leaning over the side, apparently studying the sea, and a young sailor seemingly whispering soft nothings into her ear. *This* was a phase of her character that burst upon them for the first time. She remained quite motionless till they had passed, then dried her eyes and followed them below. They went down to the main deck and saw Reginald's cabin, which he shared with another officer. Some loving hands had done up the stranger's side with many a little comfort—a thick quilted crimson counterpane, pockets for boots, and combs, and brushes against the wall, and the netting over his berth crammed with new novels. All these caught Alice's eye, and she felt a sharp twinge as she turned and saw her husband's share of the cabin bare of everything save such luxuries as the ship provided.

'You are all going to stay and dine with me,' he said, 'at the ghastly hour of half-past four, but it will take the place of five-o'clock tea for once. And if you like to make a toilette,' addressing himself to Helen, 'here are brushes and combs at your service, and I'll take care that the other fellow does not intrude.'

'But won't it seem very odd if we stay?' asked Helen, dying to do so.

'Not at all. About twenty ladies are dining besides yourselves; so look sharp, the first bugle has gone.'

He treated Alice as an utter stranger; and Alice, now that he was really and truly going, began to realise what she was losing. Regret, remorse, and love were getting the better of pride, obstinacy, and suspicion. Miss Fane's influence was gradually wearing away in Helen Mayhew's society. She choked back the blinding tears that would come into her eyes, and bit her quivering lips, so that Helen might not see her tardy sorrow. Helen was calmly titivating herself at the glass, and did not observe her companion's emotion.

'Come, Alice, be quick!' she exclaimed at last. 'Take off your jacket, child; your serge will do very nicely. Here, wash your face and brush your hair; you look quite wild and dishevelled.' Alice mechanically rose to obey her. 'What a dandy Reginald is!' she proceeded. 'I had no idea he was such a fine gentleman: ivory-backed brushes with monograms, and all his toilet accessories to correspond—boot-hook, button-hook, shoe-horn, all complete. Let's see what his dressing-case is like inside.'

'Oh don't,' cried Alice piteously; 'he hates to have his things rummaged, I know he does.'

'What nonsense, my dear girl!' opening the case. 'Here, have some white rose—hold out your handkerchief.'

'No, thank you, I would rather not.'

'Ridiculous goose, afraid to have it because it is your husband's! Listen to me, Alice,' she said, more gravely, putting her hand on Alice's shoulder; 'he *is* your husband as sure as Mark is mine. Say *something* to him before he goes. Promise me that you will. There! there's the dinner-bugle. Now mind,' opening the cabin door hastily and speaking to Alice over her shoulder, 'it will be your *last* chance.'

They found Reginald waiting at the foot of the stairs to escort them to dinner, where he sat between them at the captain's table. Quite a number of ladies were present, but not one to compare with Alice in appearance. Many an admiring eye was turned again and again to the lovely slight girl sitting next Fairfax. A youthful sub, who was at the opposite table, after gazing at her for nearly five minutes, gave utterance to the universal query, 'Who is she?'

'I say, who the deuce is that pretty girl sitting next Fairfax? She is uncommon good-looking.'

'Don't know, I'm sure,' returned his neighbour; 'his sister most likely. She is downright lovely. Such a nose and chin, and sweet kissable little mouth!'

'You had better not let Fairfax hear you, my dear boy. Maybe she's his wife.'

'Wife! That girl! You can just step upstairs and tell that to the marines.'

'I would give a trifle to know who she is,' remarked a third, upon whom a brandy-and-soda had had a most reviving effect.

'I can tell you,' said Alice's acquaintance, the naval officer, who had just come down and seated himself at the end of the table; 'she is the wife of that young fellow next her.'

'What nonsense! He is not married.'

'Oh yes, he is,' observed a hitherto silent youth, who had been devoting himself ardently to his

dinner, and who now plunged into the discussion pending the arrival of the second course. 'He *is* married, but he and his wife have had no end of a shindy, I hear; that's the reason he is going abroad. Just look at them now, as grave and as glum as if they were at a funeral.'

'What a pity it is that marriage is so often the grave of love!' remarked a cynical little artillery-man, putting up his eyeglass and staring across at the other table. 'They are an uncommonly good-looking couple, anyway. The fellow reminds me of Millais' "Black Brunswicker," only he is darker.'

So saying, he languidly dropped his glass and resumed his dinner.

The moment of parting came, and the general feeling was that the sooner it was over the better.

Putting on their hats and jackets, Alice and Helen hastened on deck; Alice's heart thumping, her knees trembling, and her face as pale as death. Here they were joined by Mr Mayhew and Reginald, who were having a few last words.

'Come along, Helen,' said Mark, taking her arm, and leading her down the gangway, good-naturedly intending to give the other couple a moment to themselves; but if it had been to save Alice's life, she could not have uttered a syllable. She intended to have said something—what, she scarcely knew—but her dry lips could not frame a sound, and they reached the carriage in dead silence.

'Good-bye, Mark! Good-bye, Helen! Good-bye, Alice!' said her husband hurriedly.

Alice turned on him a wistful glance, but a cold farewell was all she read in his stern, dark eyes. In another second he was clanking up the gangway, a vision of a dark-blue uniform, a close-cropped brown head, and he was gone; and Alice leant back in her corner of the carriage, and gave way to a passion of weeping no longer to be restrained.

CHAPTER X.

GEOFFREY SPEAKS HIS MIND.

ALICE remained at the Mayhews' for ten days, previous to going to Monkswood. She was very quiet and subdued in public, but in private her feelings were not so well under control. If the walls of her room could have spoken, the good folks downstairs would have been amazed at some of their revelations. They could have told how Alice flung herself on her bed the night the *Alligator* sailed, and wept the bitterest tears she ever shed.

'If he *is* innocent,' she said, 'he will never, never forgive me. What have I done? I have had the happiness of my life in my own keeping, and thrown it away with both hands.'

Leaving Alice stretched on her bed, perfectly worn out and exhausted with crying, her face buried in the pillows to stifle her sobs, let us follow the *Alligator* and see how her husband is getting on.

They have rounded Finisterre, and are having, if anything, rather worse than the usual Bay weather. Tremendous Atlantic rollers are tossing the *Alligator* about as if she were a hûge toy. Now she yaws over, down, down, down to this side, now she slowly rights herself from an angle of at least 40°, and goes over to that. They are having a very bad time of it no doubt, for it has now commenced to blow, not half but a whole gale. All but those whose duty it is to remain on deck have gone below—all but one tall figure in a military great-coat, who is standing under the bridge, and keeping his equilibrium as best he can, considering that he is a *soldier*.

He seems perfectly insensible to the lurching ship, the torrents of water sweeping the decks, the whistling of the wind through the rigging, and the

weather-beaten sailors' anxious faces. *Seems* so only; in his heart he is saying,—

'If this goes on she will founder. It will be a terrible thing for all these poor fellows and their friends at home, but a rare piece of good luck for *me*.'

However, the *Alligator* did not go to the bottom, thanks to Providence, rare seamanship, and her own sea-going qualities; but that she never was out in anything that tried the latter so thoroughly was admitted by the oldest salt on board.

. . . . . .

Geoffrey escorted Alice down to Monkswood about a fortnight after her husband had sailed. The carriage they occupied was empty: for the first part of the journey they had it all to themselves. Geoffrey thought this an excellent opportunity for giving Alice what he called a little bit of his mind, so, having arranged himself and his rug to his complete satisfaction, in the seat facing hers, and sticking his eyeglass firmly in his eye, he commenced,—

'*You* are a nice young woman, I must say. I have the worst, the very worst possible opinion of you.'

'You can't think how grieved I am to hear you say so,' said Alice, looking up from *Punch*, with a complacent smile.

'It's no smiling matter,' he replied, angrily, 'you heartless, obstinate little—little—I don't know what to call you.'

'Don't hesitate to relieve your mind; you have generally a fine command of language. Pray don't let my feelings stand in your way.'

'Well—*vixen*, then—a little vixen!—allowing your *husband*'—with much emphasis on the word—'to go out of the country in this way; the very best, the nicest fellow in the whole world. His little finger is worth ten of you. Letting him go

when a word would have stopped him. The idea of a chit like you'—with scathing contempt—'having it in her power to control a fellow's movements! Now you have sent him to that white man's graveyard—India—I hope you are satisfied?'

'There was no occasion for him to go.'

'Every occasion, once you had taken it into your head to leave him. You could not both live at home, and apart, without no end of a scandal—a young couple barely out of their honeymoon. Even now there are whispers, I can tell you; but, as everyone knows Rex to be a red-hot soldier, the row that they say is going to come off out there will be sufficient excuse to most; few will guess the real reason of his leaving England—an obstinate, credulous, heartless wife.'

'Really, Geoffrey, you have the most astounding assurance. What next, pray?'

'One great comfort to me is,' proceeded Geoffrey, removing his glass and leaning back with folded hands, 'that when this tremendous lie is found out, and squashed, everyone will be down on you like a thousand tons of bricks. I am quite looking forward to it, I can tell you,' rubbing his hands. 'Thank goodness, you are not *my* wife, that's all.'

'To be your wife!' she exclaimed, contemptuously; 'what an alluring idea! Why not suggest Norman at once?'

Geoffrey's youth was his tender point.

'I am glad you are not *my* wife,' continued Geoffrey, perfectly unruffled by her interruption. 'I remember you as a small child—a horrid, cross, cantankerous little monkey, flying into awful tantrums and rages for nothing at all. You bit me once, I recollect, my young lady.'

'I'm sure I never did!' cried Alice indignantly.

'Pardon me; I have every reason to remember it. Your teeth were as sharp then as your tongue is now. You asked my pardon, and said you were

very sorry, and all that, and I forgave you. Query, will Reginald forgive you for the nice trick you have served him? What possessed him to marry you is a riddle I have given up long ago. However, if anyone can break you in to trot nicely and quietly in double harness, Reginald is the man. He stands no nonsense, as I daresay you know by this time, madam.'

'Have you done, Geoffrey?'

'Not quite yet. Supposing he is killed out there, or is carried off by fever or cholera, how will you feel? The chances are fifty to one against his ever coming home. If he does not, his death will lie at your door as surely as if you had murdered him.'

Now Alice, whatever fear she had of Helen, had no awe of Geoffrey, and whatever she might suffer from self-reproach, had no idea of being taken to task in this way by him.

'One would think, to hear you talk, Geoffrey, that you were the injured party. Pray, what business is it of yours, my kind and complimentary cousin? If you could contrive to mind your own affairs and leave me to manage mine, I should feel obliged,' said Alice, with much dignity, taking up *Punch* once more from her lap and casting a look of indignant defiance over the top of its pages at her irrepressible cousin.

'By rights you ought to be at school; you are barely eighteen—far too young to know your own mind; not that you have much mind to know,' he added, crossing his legs and gazing at her dispassionately.

'Much or little, it is made up on one subject most thoroughly,' returned Alice, with an angry spot on either cheek. 'If you do not cease these civilities and leave me in peace, Geoffrey, I shall get out at the next station, and travel in another carriage.'

'Here you are then?' he returned, unabashed, as the slackening pace and large sheds full of rolling stock and network of lines betokened their arrival at a junction.

'This will do,' said a high treble voice, and the carriage-door opened and displayed two very fashionable-looking ladies, a maid, a poodle, various monstrous wicker travelling cases, a varied assortment of small parcels, dressing-cases, umbrellas, and other light odds and ends. The party were under the charge of a stout, red-faced, irascible-looking old gentleman, who seemed by no means equal to the occasion, and was soon to be seen coursing up and down the platform, inveighing at porters, accosting guards, and altogether in a state of excitement bordering on delirium.

The two ladies, the poodle (smuggled), and many of the smaller packages found places in the carriage with Alice and Geoffrey; and after a time were joined by the old gentleman, frightfully out of breath and out of temper.

The presence of outsiders put an end to hostilities between our young friends, and their discussion was postponed to a more appropriate occasion. Alice even vouchsafed to accept a fresh foot-warmer and a cup of tea from Geoffrey's hands, in token of a truce.

Although the month was March, it was still bitterly cold, and Alice shivered as they sped along through fields still brown, past curious old hamlets and farmhouses, with red high-pitched roofs or quaint black and white timbered walls; past dumpy little high-shouldered-looking village churches; past grey manorial halls peeping through their still bare leafless woods; past flaming scarlet modern erections in the all-prevailing Queen Anne style; past scattering cattle and galloping long-tailed colts, at thundering express speed.

Alice saw but little of the landscape; her eyes

were dim with unshed tears, that nearly blinded her.

Was ever any girl so miserably unfortunate, so wretchedly unhappy as herself? She had had to abide by principle and duty—to hold aloof from her husband till he could clear himself. But where was Reginald now? What was he doing? Could he but guess the awful blank he had made in her life? Supposing that Geoffrey's prediction came true! she thought, with a sudden contraction of her heart. What would she not give for one moment's glimpse of him now? Query, would she have been happier had her wish been gratified? The picture would unfold a hazy, languid afternoon, the *Alligator* steaming down the glassy Red Sea twelve knots an hour; the passengers enjoying a practical experience of the *dolce far niente*—some dozing in cane chairs or on the benches, their caps pulled over their eyes, gracefully nodding and coquetting with the fickle goddess Sleep; some playing deck-quoits; some endeavouring, spite of drowsiness, to interest themselves in a yellow-backed novel; some playing draughts; some smoking; some one or two, 'though lost to sight to memory dear,' beneath a shady umbrella, in company with a lot of flounces and neat little steel-buckled high-heeled shoes.

Down in the saloon, half-a-dozen kindred spirits are drinking the cup that cheers, etc., dispensed by the pretty little hands of a pretty little woman, the wife of a colonel returning from a six months' European tour, charged with quantities of nice new dresses and a freshly-whetted appetite and zest for flirtation. She has helped to 'get up' theatricals on board, and played her part to admiration; she sings delightfully piquante French songs to an audience of enthralled fellow-passengers; she tells amusing little stories about the other ladies in her cabin to her ravished listeners; she treats everything as a joke—even Sir Reginald Fairfax amuses

her. He avoids all the ladies, never speaks to them, and keeps aloof from the fair sex in a manner that stimulates her vanity and her curiosity alike. However, she has overcome circumstances, and by a propitiously-dropped book made his acquaintance, and finds that 'he is altogether charming, and every bit as nice as he looks.' This she explains to the lady at the next washing-stand, as she dresses elaborately for dinner.

Sir Reginald is compelled to come to five-o'clock tea—there is no escape for him—and he submits to circumstances with as good a grace as he can muster.

Behold the picture Alice would have seen, had second sight been vouchsafed to her! Pretty, very pretty Mrs Wynyard, in a dressy pink cotton, pouring out tea at the end of one of the saloon tables for the benefit of two ladies and five gentlemen, who are all in the highest possible spirits, and discussing the lottery that they are getting up on passing Perim. Her husband is the object of Mrs Wynyard's most marked civilities; he has been deputed to cut the cake, and is fulfilling the task with wonderful skill and alacrity, and is laughing and talking with as much animation as anyone else. For the moment he has cast care behind him and closed his eyes to the past; and, indeed, care is but a sorry associate for a young man of five-and-twenty.

. . . . . .

To leave the tea-party on board the *Alligator*, and return to Alice in the railway carriage, does not take us more than a second. Whilst her face is steadfastly turned away from the new arrivals, they have been regarding her with a long exhaustive stare.

'Who are these young people?' they ask themselves, with the intolerance of people in their own county. 'The girl is well dressed, and might be good-looking if she had more colour and not those

dark rings round her eyes,' was their mental verdict. These ladies themselves, attired in fashion's latest *hint* of fashion, by no means disdained to bring art (and a good deal of art) to the aid of nature.

One of them was not merely rouged, she was *raddled;* and over her head fully forty summers had flown. Nevertheless, her sight was still eagle-keen, and on the strap of a dressing-case she deciphered a card and the name 'Fairfax.' Electrical effect! Yes, 'Fairfax' as plain as a pike-staff. Was this girl the young bride, the beauty, that there had been so much talk about? She must be.

And the youth. Was he her husband? That boy! Preposterous! If not her husband, *who* was he, and where was Sir Reginald Fairfax?

You may rest assured that she did not keep her discovery or her surmises to herself; and no sooner had Alice and Geoffrey left the train than she took her companions into her confidence, and pointed out with emphasis the open carriage and imposing-looking pair of bays that were visible above the palings outside the station, and into which Lady Fairfax and her companion had just stepped and driven off.

Why did the bride come thus, alone? Where was her husband? Who was her escort?

The rosy-cheeked lady lived within an easy distance of Manister, and she set the ball of rumour and conjecture rolling along so gaily and so speedily, that all the matrons within miles of Monkswood soon regarded Alice with feelings bordering on ferocity. In the first place, she had carried off the best *parti* in the county. This was bad enough; but to be separated from him within three months of their marriage, and to arrive on their hands as a very bad little black sheep, was surely beyond endurance. She had *nothing* to expect from their charity or generosity.

CHAPTER XI.

'EASTWARD, HO!'

THE *Alligator* put in at Malta for twenty-four hours, and all the passengers landed and 'did' the sights. Reginald, in company with some fellow-sightseers, visited the cathedral, the fried monks, and other noteworthy objects, and sentimental as it sounds, he strolled past the house where he had first met Alice.

'Who would have thought,' he said to himself, 'that that simple, unsophisticated girl would have turned out so hard and unyielding?' She had given him a bitter lesson; he had done with her and all womankind, that was certain; but before he reached Port Saïd his heart was considerably softened.

The handsome young second lieutenant and he were constantly thrown together, and had become capital friends. They were partners at whist, and frequently played in the same game at deck-quoits. One evening they were standing in the stern, watching a large steamer passing in the distance, homeward bound, when the lieutenant abruptly broached the delicate subject of matrimony.

'No one would think,' he said, critically surveying his companion, 'that *you* were a married man.'

'Then you are not as clever as a friend of mine, who declares that he recognises a Benedict at once by the cut of his boots, and could swear to his umbrella,' said Sir Reginald.

'You haven't a married look about you,' resumed the sailor, 'no, nor your wife either. I never was more amazed than when she told me she was married.'

'Indeed!' replied Sir Reginald stiffly.

'Yes, I put my foot in it rather; I *always* do, if

there is the slightest aperture for that extremity. Thinking her a girl come on board with her friends merely to see off some casual acquaintance, I told her that the chances were that many of those embarking would never see England again. A most happy remark, was it not?' observed the sailor empathically.

'And what then?' asked his companion, with averted eyes, busily arranging the focus of his opera-glasses.

'"Oh!" she said, "don't, my husband is going;" and then she burst into floods of tears. Such oceans I never saw; how they poured down into Portsmouth Dock I sha'n't soon forget.'

'Did she say I was her husband?' inquired Sir Reginald, looking at him searchingly.

'Yes, of course she did. You are, are you not?' returning his gaze with wide-open, curious eyes.

'I am,' very shortly. 'After all, that is not a P. and O. boat. Now she is close, you can easily see that she is one of the Messageries; yes, you were right after all, and I was wrong,' said Sir Reginald, changing the conversation, and handing the glasses back to the lieutenant.

A few minutes later he moved away, and leaning over the bulwarks in a secluded spot he finished his cheroot alone. Somehow his heart felt lighter than it had done for a long time; and when, some hours later, he went below to his 'horse-box,' and found his own particular fellow-passenger asleep and snoring, he took out a cabinet photo of Alice, taken shortly after their wedding, and gazed at it long and earnestly. How happy she looked—how lovely! Infamously as she had treated him, there was no one like his Alice after all. He had the weakness to kiss the pasteboard and put it under his pillow, and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

The *Alligator* of course stopped at Port Saïd, that perennial abode of sand, flies, and dogs; full

of melancholy-looking empty cafés chantants, where the performers, ranged on the platforms, and all ready to strike up, appear to be only waiting for an audience, and audience there is none. The sandy streets were full of people — Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics. The home-coming Anglo-Indian, with stupendous mushroom topee swathed in a quarter of a mile of white puggaree, and armed with a large double-covered umbrella, passes the out-going 'Griff,' got up in pot-hat, dogskin gloves, cane, etc., with a stony stare.

But a very little of Port Said goes a long way with most people: and the *Alligator* passengers, having laid in a supply of eau-de-cologne, oranges, and umbrellas, with which to face the Red Sea, were not sorry to troop back on board to the welcome signal of the 'dinner' flag.

They edged their way cautiously through the Canal, and bore down the Red Sea with wind and weather in their favour. The sky and sea were like Oxford and Cambridge blue; there was not a ripple in the water. The far-receding Arabian coast engaged the attention of at least a dozen deluded opera-glasses looking out for Mount Sinai.

Oddly-shaped islands were passed, including the notorious 'Brothers,' so little above water and so much in the line of traffic, that more than one ill-fated steamer has borne down on them at full speed and sunk like a stone. Aden was left behind in due time, and after a pleasant breezy run across the Indian Ocean, one early morning Colaba lighthouse was descried in sight, and not long afterwards they were steaming majestically up Bombay harbour, and anchored off the Apollo Bund. To a new arrival, how bright and gorgeous and Eastern it all looked!

The long low stretch of land, covered with white and yellow buildings of all shapes and sizes, set off with a background of green trees; rising here and

there against the turquoise sky were palms lofty and graceful, which alone made everyone realise that they were actually in the East at last.

The harbour was crowded with shipping. Steamers and sailing ships at anchor abounded on all sides; and flitting in every direction were native bunder-boats plying between them and the shore. Fishing-boats, with enormous lateen-shaped sails, were spread up the harbour towards Elephanta. Even the grotesque junk was represented: and altogether the scene was novel and lively. And now for the moment of parting and disembarking on board the *Alligator*. None of the former were particularly tender, for there had been no very *prononcé* flirtations. In this respect the troopers pale before the P. and O., and those who were bound for the same station had generally herded together on the voyage out. There was wild work at the railway station, but after awhile the *Alligator's* late freight were steaming along to their several destinations in Bengal, Madras, or Bombay.

Sir Reginald Fairfax and Captain Vaughan, Seventeenth Hussars, along with the draft in their charge, were forwarded to Camelabad; and after a wearisome three-days' journey, half-blinded with glare and smothered with dust, they found themselves (figuratively speaking) in the arms of their brother 'Braves.' The Seventeenth had only recently arrived in the station, and had barely shaken down into the quarters vacated by the outgoing 'Guides,' whose furniture, horses, and traps they had also succeeded to, after the exchange of sundry bags of rupees, as horses, traps, and furniture, once settled at an Indian station, rarely leave it. An old *habitué* will say to a new arrival—a bride most likely, and vain of her first equipage,—

'Oh, I see you have got the Carsons' carriage.'

'Oh dear, no; it is ours.'

'Yes, I know that, of course; but it was the

Carsons', and before that it belonged to the Boltons, who got it from the Kennedys, who brought it from Madras.'

Camelabad was a lively, populous station, large and scattered. There was always something going on. The hospitality of the Anglo-Indian is proverbial; society, as a rule, pulls well together. The backbiting, scandal, and cause for scandal, so much attributed to Indian circles, is no worse out there than it is at home. The fact of being fellow exiles draws people together, and they are more genial to each other than in their native land.

But to return to Camelabad. It was certainly a very gay place; dances, dinners, theatricals, 'At homes,' not to speak of polo matches, sky races, and paper-chases, succeeded each other rapidly. The Seventeenth Hussars were soon drawn into the giddy vortex; they set up a weekly 'function,' and gave a capital ball, and speedily ingratiated themselves with their neighbours. They went everywhere and did everything, 'as people always do who have not long come out,' quoth the Anglo-Indian of thirty years' standing, with lofty contempt. They all went out with one exception, and he never mixed in society; for which reason, strange to say, society was most anxious to make his acquaintance. The Seventeenth were repeatedly asked, 'Why does not your junior major show? Excepting on boards or courts-martial, he is never to be seen.'

'Why does he not come and call?' a lady of high social position asked the colonel. 'I want to have him to dinner. What makes him so unsociable? Such a handsome young man too! I saw him at the review on the Queen's Birthday. You must stir him up!'

'I can't, my dear madam. I have tried to stir him up, as you call it, but it was no good. Nevertheless, he is a capital fellow; first-rate officer;

keen sportsman; and awfully popular with men. But I take it he does not care for ladies; got rather a facer from one of them, I fancy.'

This having transpired, Sir Reginald became more interesting than ever to the public mind; but as all invitations invariably met the same fate—a polite refusal—he was in time permitted to 'gang his ain gait,' and relegated to the ranks of the outer barbarians. He played polo with the regimental team, rode the regimental cracks in the sky races, and was looked on as an enormous acquisition by the Seventeenth, who considered him a kind of Admirable Crichton in a small way, his riding, shooting, and cricketing being much above par. His personal appearance they regarded with undisguised complacency as a valuable adjunct to the average good looks of the corps; and he was installed in their opinion as an out-and-out good fellow and thorough gentleman.

'I used to be sick of hearing some of the Fifth fellows quoting Fairfax for this, that, and the other,' remarked one; 'but, strange to say, their swan *is* a swan after all, and has not turned out to be that very toothsome but homely bird—a goose!'

With all his popularity, he was the last man with whom any of them would have taken a liberty. He would have been bold indeed who would have asked him why he left the Fifth Hussars, not to speak of a fine country place, magnificent shooting, and ten thousand a-year, to lead a dull, monotonous life on the scorching plains of India. He would have been bolder still who would have inquired about the fair and exceedingly pretty girl that Captain Vaughan had seen sitting next him at dinner the day of embarkation. Who was she? Was she his sister or his sweetheart? Someone said he had a vague idea that Fairfax was a married man; but he was silenced and crushed by general consent.

Fairfax was a bachelor—crossed in love, if you will—but a bachelor *pur et simple.* Look at his bungalow—rigid simplicity. Look at his room—not a bit of woman's work, not a photo, not an ornament. A perilously narrow camp-bed, a few chairs, a portable kit, a writing-table, and a squadron of boots, and that was all. There were a few books, chiefly on cavalry tactics and military history, leavened with half-a-dozen sporting novels—not a French one among them. Anything but like the accepted idea of a smart young cavalry officer's lair. If, as they say, a man's room is a type of himself, Fairfax was a soldier, a rigid moralist, and above all a bachelor, and one who would no doubt develop into an *old* bachelor into the bargain.

Captain Campbell and Lieutenant Harvey were sitting in their mutual verandah, in long chairs, clad in costumes more conspicuous for ease than elegance, smoking, taking away the characters of their neighbours' horses, and minutely discussing the approaching big races. From horses they came to riders, and finally to Fairfax.

'He is one of the best fellows going, but I cannot make him out; he looks like a man with a story.'

'He does; and he *has* one, you may be sure,' replied Captain Campbell with conviction, languidly puffing at his cheroot.

'If he was the life and soul of the Fifth, as we have heard, their ideas of mirth and jollity are more moderate than I could have imagined. Sometimes, I grant you, he is in fairish spirits, and he can say very amusing things; but, as a rule, he is silent and *distrait.* It is certainly in field sports and on parade that he shines most; brilliant sociability is not his *forte.*'

'No, decidedly not; and yet how all the fellows like him, from the latest youngster from home upwards; although he is down upon the boys at times,

and has the art of being more politely and unpleasantly sarcastic than anyone I know. One would think he was forty to hear him talk, he is so circumspect and staid; and he can't be more than six or seven-and-twenty at the very outside. The youngsters respect him as if he was the Commander-in-chief himself; and the remarks at his end of the table are never so free as elsewhere. There must be some reason for his premature gravity. There's a woman in the case, depend upon it,' said Captain Campbell, tossing away the end of his cigar with an emphatic gesture. '*Cherchez la femme*, say I.'

'I should not wonder. Probably he has been crossed in love—jilted perhaps,' suggested Mr Harvey.

'She must be uncommonly hard to please, whoever she is, for he is one of the best-looking fellows you could see—well-born and rich.' Captain Campbell paused for a moment to reflect on these advantages, and then continued, 'It is a curious thing that he never mentions a woman's name, and is altogether very close about himself and his family. Do you remark that he takes tremendously long solitary rides, and gives his horses the most work of any man in the station, for he gallops often, he gallops far, and he gallops fast.'

'He never seems to care to ride with anyone, don't you know.' (Mr Harvey put in 'don't you know,' on an average, every three words.) 'I offered my agreeable society at various times, but he always put me off in that quiet way of his, don't you know; so I thought: "My dear fellow, *saint* as we think you, you have some little game up, and I'll see what it is, don't you know."'

'That will do, my dear fellow; that's the eleventh "don't you know." Stick to Fairfax!' exclaimed his companion impatiently.

'Well, last Saturday evening, about five o'clock,

I saw him going out of his compound on that new black Australian of his; and as I was just going for a ride myself, I nipped up on "Agag," and struck out after him, on the sly naturally; and a nice chase he led me—for nothing too. He went easy enough till he got well out of sight of the cantonment, and then, by Jove! didn't he put the pace on! *Oculus meus!* how he took it out of the Waler! He rode slap across country as if he was mad, clean over every nullah, big or little, that came in his way. I had a hideous conviction that, if I followed him, especially on "Agag," I should come to a violent end, so I stayed in a mango tope, and kept my "cold grey" on him in the distance. When he had galloped his fill, and exorcised whatever demon possessed him, he came back after a ring of seven or eight miles, with the black all in a lather, but looking as cool as a cucumber himself. I joined him—quite promiscuously, of course—but I fancy that he twigged he had been followed; there was a look in those keen eyes of his that made me feel deuced uncomfortable. I'm certain that he has something on his mind. A woman, for choice. Maybe *he* threw her over, and she went mad, or drowned herself, or something, don't you know, and the pangs of remorse are preying on his soul, eh?' cried Mr Harvey, having talked himself breathless.

'A lively and cheerful idea truly,' said Captain Campbell, sitting erect in his chair. 'In my opinion, it's far more likely that the girl of his affections has been faithless. He never talks of a woman, never gets a letter from one; his correspondents are all of the sterner sex—*vide* the letter-rack—and he keeps his own concerns religiously sealed from every eye, and never talks of himself in connection with any belongings. He is a mystery, and a most interesting one. Why did he come out here? Why did he leave his own regiment, where he was so

popular? What makes him so reserved and self-contained? I have watched him at mess, when all of you were listening open-mouthed to one of the doctor's stories. I have seen Fairfax, when he thought no one was observing him, lean back in his chair, with a sombre, weary look, as if he were sick and tired of life. And that time when Vaughan had fever so badly, and he nursed him, I sat up with him part of a night. Vaughan was sleeping, and he remained in the verandah. I fell asleep too, and when I woke up a couple of hours later there was Fairfax in the very same attitude as I had left him, still gazing at the stars, and still apparently thinking profoundly. I watched him for a good while before I spoke, and there was something indescribable in his face and attitude that made me feel very sorry for him, and I seemed nearer to knowing him that night than I had ever done before. Presently I said, "A penny for your thoughts, Fairfax," and he gave such a start as he turned round and said, "They are not worth it; they are merely about myself, and not very pleasant ones either;" and then he got up and went back to Vaughan and stayed beside him the remainder of the night. He is one of the best fellows and most gentlemanly men I ever knew. But as to following him as you have done'—flourishing a fresh cheroot in the direction of his friend—'or ever trying to force myself into his confidence, I would as soon think of cutting my throat.'

'Did you remark him on Christmas Day?' asked Mr Harvey eagerly, as if struck by a sudden thought. 'After dinner, when we all drank "Sweethearts and wives," how taken back he looked. I was sitting opposite him, and he turned as pale as a sheet. He set down his glass untasted at first, but I remarked that he drank it off afterwards. There is a woman in the case, that's certain—Chokra! bring me a brandy-and-soda.'

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This conversation took place nearly a year after Sir Reginald had joined the Seventeenth, and during that year two events of importance had occurred. I will relate them as they came. He had been several months at Camelabad, and had quite settled down to Indian military life, and was beginning to look upon the short time he had spent at home as a sort of fevered vision. He never heard from Alice. His only correspondents were Mark Mayhew and Geoffrey, with an occasional note from Helen. He heard from her that his wife had shut herself up at Monkswood and declined all society, that her answers to their letters were rare and brief, and that her aunt, Miss Saville, had been laid up in Ireland with rheumatic fever, and would not be able to join her niece for some time.

This was all that he had gleaned about Alice since he had left home; consequently, when carelessly glancing through the *Home News* one mail-day his eye was caught by the following: 'Fairfax —On the 10th inst., at Monkswood, Lady Fairfax, of a son,' he was simply thunderstruck. He took the paper over to his own bungalow adjoining the mess and read the paragraph over and over again. It had an absolute fascination for him—but read as he would, it came to the same thing. It could not be her, it was some other Lady Fairfax; but scarcely of Monkswood also, his common sense urged. He felt a conviction that it was true, and yet he could not realise it. He a father—Alice a mother! Well, at any rate, he was glad it was a boy. There was an heir to Looton now, whatever happened to him. His father would hardly have rested in his grave if the Fairfax money and acres had gone to the Serles and the good old name become extinct. Yes, he was glad that there was no chance of that now; but as for Alice, he thought worse of her than ever. That he should know of their child's birth through the medium of a news-

paper showed the contempt in which she held him. His dark cheek reddened as he angrily flung the paper from him, and began to pace the room rapidly from one end to the other. He would take no notice whatever of the event, as far as Alice was concerned. No, he certainly would *not* write to her. This was the resolution he came to, as he proceeded hastily to dress for mess, where he was, if anything, more silent and preoccupied than usual.

As he was going to bed that night he called his servant Cox into his room—a most exceptional proceeding. Cox was an old retainer, who had followed him from the Fifth, and believed implicitly that the sun rose and set entirely and exclusively in the person of his master the major. He alone was in Sir Reginald's confidence, and naturally a silent and taciturn man; touching his master's private affairs, he was mute as the grave.

'Here, Cox, I thought I would show you this,' said Sir Reginald, holding out the paper and pointing to the announcement.

Cox saluted, slowly read the paragraph, and stared blankly at his master; then recovering his manners and his presence of mind, said, concisely,—

'I give you joy, sir.'

'Thank you,' said Sir Reginald, pouring out a tumbler of champagne; 'you are to drink his health and keep the news to yourself.'

'Health and happiness and a long life,' said Cox, quaffing off the toast as if it was spring water, and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. After staring expectantly at his master for some seconds, and finding him evidently buried in his own thoughts, he added, gruffly, 'I suppose I may go now, sir?' An eager nod of assent was his only answer, and he lost no time in backing himself out into the verandah, and hurrying off to his barrack-room in time to report himself before the trumpets sounded the last post.

The following mail brought a letter from Mrs

Mayhew. She generally enclosed a little note in her husband's epistles, but this was a long effusion for a wonder.

'Monkswood.

'MY DEAR REGINALD,—You will have already seen the birth of your son and heir in the paper, and no doubt were as much astonished as everyone else. For the last six months Alice has lived in the greatest retirement, seeing no one. Two or three times we have asked her to come up to us, and she always excused herself with one ridiculous plea after another. A telegram from the housekeeper last Tuesday brought me down here the same evening, and I found Alice very, very ill—so ill that for several days the doctors were afraid to hold out any hopes of her recovery. I dared not write and tell you this last mail, but waited till this one, in hopes of sending you better news. Her youth and a wonderful constitution have pulled her through, and I may say that she is out of danger, though still extremely weak, and subject to prolonged fainting fits.

'The life that she has led for the last few months has been the chief cause of her illness. Morris tells me that she used to walk for hours through the woods in all weathers, and took so little food that it is a wonder she did not die of simple inanition. She never dined, but simply went through the farce of sitting at table breaking up breadcrumbs, sending away the most tempting delicacies untasted. Poor motherless girl, angry as I am with her, I cannot help being sorry for her; she is so innocent, so utterly inexperienced, and so alone in the world—thanks to herself of course. If she had been a trusting wife, how happy and proud you would both be now! She is so good and patient I cannot help loving her in spite of myself. Her pride in her baby is simply ridiculous, and very touching to see.

To hear her, you would think it was the *first* of its species, or at any rate that nothing so beautiful and so remarkable in every way had ever been born. A mother at eighteen, and looking even younger, I tell her that no one will ever believe the child is hers. She has about as much experience of babies as my Hilda—a baby with a baby. He is a splendid boy, a real Fairfax. If I were to declare that he is like you, you would say, "Rubbish! all babies are exactly alike!" But he *is* very like you all the same. He is to be called Maurice, after her father, and Mark and I are to be sponsors. I have just asked Alice if she has any message for you, and she has replied in a very low and subdued voice—*none*. I have no patience with her. I should like to take her baby out of her arms and give her *such* a shaking, only she looks so dreadfully frail and delicate—I really *would*. I need not tell you that now, more than ever, it behoves you to trace the false certificate. It is too provoking that you have not been able to get leave to go to Cheetapore and search personally. It is really a dreadful misfortune the register being lost, and the clergyman and clerk both dead; but money can do a *great deal*, and you are the last man in the world to spare it. I will write again very shortly, and hope to have good news from you before long.—Your affectionate cousin, HELEN MAYHEW.'

Helen kept her promise, and during her stay at Monkswood Reginald heard from her regularly; but neither line nor message was ever enclosed from his wife, so neither line nor message was ever sent by him. He did not even mention her name in his letters—letters which Helen could not refuse to Alice's wistful eyes—letters which Alice read with pale face and trembling lips, and returned without a single observation.

Two months later a bad attack of jungle fever

procured Sir Reginald leave of absence. For months he had been like a bird beating against the bars of his cage to get away to Cheetapore, as letters, telegrams, and inquiries of all kinds had been utterly useless in throwing any light on the mysterious certificate. But the colonel of the Seventeenth Hussars was rather short of officers, and could not spare his smart young major, who had no claim whatever to leave, having so recently arrived from England; besides, his particular motto was, 'No leave;' and, as an Irish sub once angrily expresssed it, 'No leave, and as little of that as possible.'

At last Sir Reginald reached Cheetapore, very much knocked up by the long journey and a mere shadow of the man who had left it two years previously. The Twenty-ninth Dragoons, who had replaced his old regiment, hospitably took him in and 'put him up.' For two or three days he was prostrated by a recurrence of the fever, and fit for nothing. The first evening he was able to go out he went and called on the chaplain. He was not at home. Leaving a note to make an appointment, he went on to the band with one of his entertainers. As they drove round the circle, Miss Mason—*still* Miss Mason—lolling back in her carriage, could scarcely believe her eyes, and Mrs Chambers, her once firm ally, and now implacable enemy, could hardly trust hers either. She said to one of the Twenty-ninth, who lounged up to her barouche, 'Who is that in the dog-cart with Captain Fox? He looks frightfully ill.'

'Oh, that's Fairfax of the Seventeenth Hussars. He has come down here on some mysterious errand or other. He would be much better on his way to Europe instead. Looks as if he was going off the hooks, doesn't he?'

'He looks very ill indeed. What on earth brings him here?'

'Well, if you won't repeat it, I'll tell you,' com-

ing closer and, speaking confidentially. 'Strictly private, you understand. Mum's the word.'

'Oh, of course!'

'Well, I believe it's about a marriage certificate which someone posted home from here, and has caused the most frightful unpleasantness in his family. He has a wife in England, so you may fancy there was rather a scrimmage. He was only just married, and to a most awfully pretty girl too, when this particular missive dropped in. She left him at once, and he came out here with the Seventeenth. He has left no stone unturned to get the affair cleared up, but he has only managed to come down and see after it himself now—leave stopped. I fancy he will make it pretty hot for the forger if he finds him! It's ten years' penal servitude, is it not?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' replied the fair culprit faintly, looking very white. But oh! if she could only be the means of getting Charlotte Mason transferred to Australia at Government expense! How too delightful it would be! she thought, ignoring her own little share in the transaction. 'Did you say that his wife had left him?' she asked, looking intently at Sir Reginald, whose dog-cart was drawn up close by.

'So he told me.'

'How ill and worn he looks,' she thought, gazing at him. 'Supposing he should die!—he looked as if he had death in his face. If he did, she would never know a moment's peace—never! She would make full confession and trust to his mercy. He would not be hard upon her, it was not *her* fault; it was Charlotte Mason's scheme, and Charlotte ought to be shown up, unmasked, and transported.' Being a person who almost always acted on impulse, she beckoned to Captain Fox as soon as her former cavalier had sauntered away, and asked him to tell Sir Reginald Fairfax that she wished

to speak to him particularly. Much bewildered, and with great reluctance, he slowly followed the messenger to the carriage, where Mrs Chambers, with a rather frightened white face, accosted him,—

'I see you do not remember me, Captain Fairfax? It quite shocks me to see you looking so ill.'

He bowed and muttered inaudibly.

'Won't you get into my carriage for a little, and we can talk over old times?' Seeing him hesitate, she bent over the side of the carriage and whispered in his ear,—'It's about the certificate.'

With an alacrity she was quite unprepared for from his languid and delicate appearance, he accepted her invitation and took a seat opposite her, and turning his clear dark eyes upon her, looked as if he would read her very soul.

Meanwhile Captain Fox sauntered off to join a promenading dandy, muttering to himself, 'That Mrs Chambers sticks at nothing; she is becoming faster and more foolish than ever! The idea of her tackling a strange fellow like that! I had no idea he was such an ass! A regular case of "Walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly."'

'Sir Reginald,' said the spider to the supposed fly, 'I have something to tell you,' and forthwith she unfolded her tale from beginning to end. When she came to the part where she mentioned it as a joke his eyes literally blazed, and he seemed with difficulty to refrain from some exclamation; but till she concluded he was perfectly silent. When she stopped to take breath after her hurried confession, he asked, with pardonable vehemence,—

'What have I ever done to Miss Mason or you that you should do me such a deadly injury? Do you know that the happiness of my life has been utterly destroyed by your "joke," as you are pleased to call it? I must say that your and Miss Mason's reading of the word is very different to mine. The least you can do, and *shall* do,' he

said, looking at her sternly, 'will be to make out a written confession of everything, and send it up to my quarters (Captain Fox's) to-morrow. I can hardly believe that you can have been the credulous tool you would appear. Good evening,' he said, springing out of the carriage and walking over towards that of her confederate, who had been watching the conference with the liveliest dismay.

'Miss Mason!' he exclaimed, abruptly, perfectly heedless of two of Miss Mason's satellites, who, with elbows on the carriage, and got-up with enormous care, had been regaling the fair Charlotte with scraps of the latest gossip—'Miss Mason,' he reiterated, 'I know *all!*' There was an indignant tone in his voice and an angry light in his eyes that absolutely cowed *her* and astounded her companions. 'You have forged an infamous lie, you have tampered with a church register, you have caused the greatest misery to a man who never wronged you, and to a girl whom you have never even seen! You are a forger!' he continued, almost choked between the two emotions which were struggling in his breast—joy and rage. 'Unless by to-morrow morning you have made a full and explicit written statement of the whole affair, duly signed and witnessed, I shall submit the case to the cantonment magistrate, and you will be prepared to take the consequences. Penal servitude is what you deserve,' he added, with bitter emphasis, as with a parting look of unspeakable indignation he turned and made his way through the crowd.

His face was livid, his eyes burned like two coals. Captain Fox gazed at him in undisguised astonishment. 'Jove!' he thought, 'what a temper the fellow must have! He looks ready to jump down the throat of all Cheetapore this instant. He is not a man I should care to trifle with. The fair Chambers has evidently put him out, to say the least of it.'

Sir Reginald hurriedly took him aside, and in as few words as possible told him the story; and then Captain Fox's face was a study. His indignation knew no bounds. His expressions in connection with Miss Mason's name were startingly strong and vehement, and he laid the whip about his unlucky harness hack as if he had the fair culprit herself between the shafts.

Mrs Chambers' 'letter' arrived the following morning, and although somewhat more pressure had to be brought to bear on Miss Mason, her confession was received in due time. Both were enclosed to Mr Mayhew, who was to read them and forward them to Monkswood.

'Now she will, she *must* give in,' thought her husband. 'In two months her letter will be out here, and in three, please goodness, I shall be in England.'

It is hardly necessary to state that the whole story of the practical joke was all over Cheetapore in less than two days. Captain Fox was by no means reticent on the subject, which was soon known to all the Dragoons, and from them filtered to the cantonment in general. Sir Reginald was the object of universal sympathy, and interest was considerably augmented by the rumoured youth and beauty of his wife. The whole incident had a romantic flavour about it that gratified the jaded palates of the Cheetapore *monde*, and it afforded them a universally interesting nine-days' wonder. As to Miss Mason, the place was literally too hot to hold her. She and her colleague were put into 'Coventry' forthwith. Finding such a position unbearable, she took the earliest opportunity of leaving the station and going on a long visit 'up country.' But wherever she went the story was whispered with various additions (*cela va sans dire*), and to the end of her life she will have good reason to regret her *practical joke*.

CHAPTER XII.

'THE NEILGHERRIES.'

OUR hero went to the Neilgherry Hills for the remainder of his two months' leave. It is quite beyond *my* pen to describe that lovely region, but in common with almost all who have ever been there I have an admiration amounting to a passion for the Blue Hills. I declare them to be the most salubrious, delightful, beautiful range in the whole world. If I were to attempt a detailed description of these most favoured hills, I should fall so far short of their perfections that I should only incur the wrath and contempt of their many devoted admirers, so I shall content myself by merely giving a description of Sir Reginald's journey up the Ghaut.

He arrived at the foot of the hills early one morning, having spent a night of heat, mosquitoes, and consequent madness at Mettapollium. He rode up by the old road, which is nine miles to Coonor, in preference to driving up the new ghaut, a *détour* of sixteen miles. His thoughts were exceedingly pleasant, and he whistled uninterruptedly for the first two miles; but after a while the beautiful scenery he was passing through engaged his attention entirely, and more than once he stopped his horse and looked about in amazed admiration. 'Oh, if Alice could only see it! If she were here, what ecstasies she would be in!' was his frequent thought. As he journeyed steadily up, the close tropical vegetation was gradually left behind, the trees assumed a more European aspect, the air lost its thick steamy feel, and became every instant more rarefied and pure. The path appeared to wind in and out through mountain-sides clothed with trees and foliage of every description; a

foaming river was tearing headlong down a wide rocky channel and taking frantic leaps over all impediments. The scenery was splendid. In spite of hunger and fatigue, Sir Reginald felt as if he could gaze and gaze for hours, and yet that his eyes would scarcely be satisfied. Wild roses and wild geraniums abounded on all sides; enormous bunches of heliotrope were growing between the stones; lovely flowering creepers connected the trees, and as to the ferns—

The graves of several engineers who had died when this old ghaut was being made were passed—poor lonely graves! and yet, could those laid in them, so many thousands of miles away from their native land, desire to be buried in a more beautiful spot?

At one side towered the 'Droog,' crowned by Tippoo's old fortress. The 'Droog' itself, a bold beetling hill facing south, and most precipitous, seemed to stand as sentry to this garden of India. From the top of it you could look sheer down into the plains. It was on the opposite side of the river to the old ghaut, and a long day's outing from Coonor. On its summit were the grey broken walls of the fort, very old and much dismantled, and from which they say that Tippoo, when in an angry mood, used to toss his unhappy prisoners down to the plains below. There it was that the Mahrattas made their last stand against the British; and as they brought an enormous amount of treasure up from their strongholds in the plains, which treasure has never been recovered, the 'Droog' is considered a highly interesting place for more reasons than one. It is said that all the gold and jewels were thrown down a well somewhere just beyond the fort walls. One very old man was supposed to know of its whereabouts, but he would never divulge the secret, as he said the spot was guarded by the ghosts—devils, he called

them—of many Mahratta warriors, and he was afraid to incur their displeasure.

Sir Reginald arrived in due time at Coonor, and put up at an hotel, before the windows of which there was a hedge of helitrope cut like box at home, and so high and so dense, that you could ride at one side of it, and someone else at the other, without either being aware of their mutual proximity. It was one mass of flowers, and smelt like ten thousand cherry-pies, and was one of the sights of the Neilgherries. Sir Reginald relaxed somewhat as regarded society, made friends with the other inmates of the hotel, and joined in picnics to all the most celebrated views. He was well known on the Toda Mund as one of the best and most inveterate of tennis-players, and carried off the first prize in a tournament which took place during his stay.

Touching the Toda Mund, there were no Todas there then; they had long removed themselves, with their black ringlets and sheet clothing, to a more remote region; but years previously the present lawn tennis-court ground had been the home of generations of these extraordinary people.

Sir Reginald returned to his regiment much the better for his trip, and received the congratulations of his friends on his improved appearance, and also on the discovery he had made at Cheetapore; as what had been the talk of all that station naturally came to the ears of his brother officers, and they boldly conversed of himself and his *wife* as if they had known all along that he had been a married man. The individual who had been so contemptuously scouted when he had declared that Fairfax was a Benedict now found himself looked upon as a man of unusual penetration—in short, a second Daniel! and for a time his opinions were quoted at least ten per cent. above their usual regimental value.

As for Fairfax himself, a change had certainly come over the spirit of his dream. He was an altered man; no more headlong solitary rides, no more moping in his own quarters. Attired in faultless garb of undoubted 'Europe' origin, he was led, like a lamb, to make a series of calls among the chief notabilities of the place. 'Better late than never!' they mentally exclaimed when his card was handed in, and being assured that 'Missus could see,' the hero of the hour followed. His history was now as well known as if it had been published in *The Pioneer*, and the ladies of Camelabad overwhelmed him with sympathy and condolence, which he accepted with the best grace he could muster; but he shrank from speaking of his wife, save in the most distant and general terms; and it was easy to see that the mock certificate was a very sore, distasteful subject.

As each succeeding mail came in he said to himself, 'Surely this will bring a letter from Alice?' How he looked forward to mail-days no one knew but himself; how buoyant were his spirits every Saturday morning, how depressed that same evening when, tossing over the newly-arrived letters on the ante-room table, he would find one from Mark Mayhew, one from his agent, and perhaps one from his tailor, but not a line from his wife. He heard from the Mayhews that Alice had received and acknowledged the confessions; and Mark, Helen, and Geoffrey each sent him a long letter full of indignation and congratulation. The burden of each of these epistles was the same, although couched in very different style and language: it is 'Come home.' Whenever his wife endorsed their wishes, he would leave Bombay by the following mail. This was what he said to himself over and over again. Two months elapsed and no letter came—not a line, not even a message. After making allowance for every conceivable delay, he gradually

and reluctantly relinquished all hopes of the ardently-desired missive, and came to the conclusion that nothing now remained for him to think but that she wished their separation to be life-long.

One evening he mounted his horse and galloped out alone to one of his former favourite haunts, an old half-ruined temple, about six miles from the cantonment. Here he dismounted, and tied his Arab to a tree, saying to himself as he ascended the steps, 'There is no fear of any interruption here, and I will make up my mind to some definite plan before I return to Camelabad this evening.' As he paced up and down the empty echoing ruin, he tried to judge between Alice and himself as calmly and dispassionately as if he were a third person. His own motives and actions were easily explained, but Alice's were not so readily understood. What could be the meaning of her extraordinary conduct? His name had been cleared, and she, who should never have doubted him, and who, at any rate now, ought to be the first to come forward, had been dumb. There was but one reasonable solution. 'She did not know her own mind when she was married; she never cared two straws about me, and she seizes the first pretext to free herself from a distasteful union. So be it; she *shall* be free,' he muttered. 'I will hold myself utterly aloof from her for the future. I shall go home and live at Looton, and surround myself with friends—shoot, hunt, and lead as gay a bachelor life as if I had no wife in existence. Why should I expatriate myself for her sake?' he asked himself aloud.

But on second thoughts this scheme did not prove so alluring. At Looton, every room, every walk, every face would only remind him of Alice.

'I could not stand it just yet,' he muttered; 'it is all too fresh, too recent; one does not get over a thing like that so soon. In a year or two, when

I am thoroughly hardened and indifferent, I will go; meanwhile I shall remain in the Service.'

The duties of his profession had their charms for him; and the society of his brother officers was, he reflected, more welcome and more necessary to him now than ever. Weak he had always been where Alice was concerned, but for once he would be firm and be a man, and no longer an infatuated fool, following the *ignis fatuus* of a woman's caprice.

As he stood on the steps of the temple, watching the crimson sun that was slowly sinking beyond the horizon and tinting the arid plains, the distant hills, the old temple, and Reginald himself, with the gorgeous hues of its departing splendour, 'That sun,' he exclaimed, as he watched the last little red streak utterly disappear, 'has set on my folly and weakness; to-morrow will find me, in one respect at least, a different man. For the future I will endeavour to forget that I ever had a wife. I know it will be no easy matter to banish her from my thoughts, but I shall do my best. As a wife she is dead to me in all but name; her indifference shall be only rivalled by mine.' Query: Was he not still thinking of her as he sat for fully an hour, with his head resting in his hands? He was endeavouring to dig the grave of his love, and to bury decently all the unfulfilled hopes he had cherished for so long. The moon arose, owls and bats made their appearance and flitted to and fro, apparently unconscious of the silent figure on the temple steps. At length the pawing and neighing of his horse aroused him. He started up hastily, pulled himself morally together, and hurried down to the impatient steed, whom he unfastened and mounted, and in another moment was galloping away over the moonlit maidan, leaving the old temple to the undisturbed possession of a veteran hyena and a family of jackals.

The Seventeenth Hussars had expected, as a sequel to his discovery at Cheetapore, that Sir

Reginald would have returned to his ancestral halls as fast as steam could take him.

But month after month went by, and he still remained a fixture at Camelabad. He carried out his mental resolution to the letter, and left himself no leisure to think of Alice or anyone else. He returned with the greatest energy to all his bachelor amusements, kept a string of racers, hunted the regimental pack, and made constant shooting expeditions. He played whist till the small hours, and entered into everything with the greatest zeal; took a prominent if somewhat mechanical part in all the entertainments in the station, and was voted 'charming' by the ladies, both young and old. Notwithstanding his bachelor pursuits, he developed a curious and Benedict-like interest in babies—a species of humanity that he had hitherto held in abhorrence. He cast more than one inquisitive glance on the smaller fry in arms as he went round the married quarters. And Mrs Gifford, the wife of the only married captain in the Seventeenth, was amazed when her ayah informed her that 'Sir Fairfax' had more than once taken notice of her baby, 'asking age, asking boy or girl, how soon walking?' It was most flattering, if a little mysterious, and he became a greater favourite than ever with Mrs Gifford. She was not aware that her boy shone with a borrowed lustre in Sir Reginald's eyes for being almost the same age as his son, and that the toys and presents which were showered on him as he grew older were not bestowed altogether for his own sake.

A year after his visit to Cheetapore, Sir Reginald received a letter in Alice's well-known writing. 'It has come at last,' he said to himself, as with trembling hands he tore it open in his own bungalow. He drew out the photo of a sturdy dark-eyed cherub, enclosed in a sheet of blank letter-paper. At first he could hardly credit his senses; his indignation

and his bitter disappointment were too great for words. His first impulse was to tear the photo into four pieces, but, mastering this rather insane idea, he took it up and looked at it closely instead. He was glad he had not obeyed his first rash notion. The boy was certainly a splendid little fellow. Written in the corner of the carte was, 'Maurice R. Fairfax, aged thirteen months.' He was something more tangible now, his father thought, as he minutely studied every feature. He felt a thrill of novel and very pleasant pride as he looked at the bright, eager little face, and said to himself, 'This is my son. He has the Fairfax eyes and brows, I believe,' he continued, as he still studied the photo critically, 'but no one will deny that he has his mother's mouth.'

With a sigh he pieced together the torn envelope, and looked in vain for a word; the blank sheet of paper he scrupulously turned over; it was really blank indeed. He gazed at it for some time, as if there were actually something written on it; then, suddenly gathering himself together, he carefully folded it up and put it along with the photograph into the envelope, and locked them away in his desk.

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Sir Reginald had been nearly two years at Camelabad when the outbreak which had been simmering for some time in Afghanistan came to boiling-point, and the gauntlet of defiance was thrown down by the Ameer.

Captains Campbell and Vaughan were reposing in long chairs in front of their mess, much exhausted with lawn-tennis, refreshing themselves with copious iced pegs, and enjoying a delightful experience of the *dolce far niente* as embodied in Bombay—chairs and brandies-and-sodas.

Suddenly a solitary horseman was seen madly careering across the midan, in the direction of their lines.

'I say, just look at this fellow; his horse has bolted!' said Captain Campbell.

'Not a bit of it,' replied his companion serenely; 'don't you see that it's Fairfax on his chesnut, riding *ventre à terre*, as usual?'

'Hallo! Fairfax, what's up?' they shouted, as he approached. 'Are the barracks ablaze, and are you going for the fire-engine?'

'Better than that,' he cried, clattering into the compound. 'I have just come up from the general's with glorious news—we start for the front this day week.'

CHAPTER XIII.

AFGHANISTAN.

'True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field,
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.'

THE Seventeenth Hussars were duly forwarded to the frontier, and found that their final destination was Dabaule, where there was a good supply of grass and water for their horses.

Owing to the approach of winter, there was an utter stagnation of military operations, and in spite of occasional small raids on, and from, the neighbouring Afridis, the time passed monotonously enough. The weather was cold and cheerless, but the officers of the Seventeenth, headed by their junior major, did their very best to provide exercise and entertainment for their men and for the camp in general.

Football, hockey, penny readings, and theatricals were set going with remarkable success, and helped to repel the encroachments of idleness and *ennui*. The surrounding scenery was quite different to the

tiresome succession of parallel ridges presented by the ranges near the frontier. Here hill and valley were thrown together in the most admirable confusion, and clothed with short, stunted shrubs and wild olives; gloomy pine-woods marked out some of the hills in bold black relief; the distant mountains were capped with snow, and the cold at times was most intense. During the suspension of hostilities there was ample leisure for correspondence, and letter-writing was a frequent resource on a dull grey afternoon. The following is one of Sir Reginald's contributions to the mail-bag, written on his knee by the light of a small bull's-eye lantern, in the retirement of his seven-foot tent :—

'Camp Dabaule.

'MY DEAR MARK,—It is not my fault that there has been such a tremendous gap in our correspondence. I have written to you again and again, and I once more seize the opportunity of the mail-dâk passing through to send you a few lines, and hope they will meet with a better fate than my other effusions, not one of which appears to have reached you, judging by your incendiary letter. Doubtless they are in the hands of those beggars the Afridis, who rob the mails and cut the telegraph wires continually. We are all flourishing—men in good spirits, horses in capital condition; the only thing we ask is to be up and doing. Cold weather has closed the passes to a great extent, and there is nothing whatever going on. To come into our camp you would never dream that you were in an enemy's country, we have made ourselves so completely at home, although our accommodation is not magnificent. We have all small hill-tents, weighing about eighty pounds, in which there is just room enough to turn round, and no more. We all wear thick fur coats, called poshteens, and fur caps, quite the Canadian style. You would have some difficulty in recognis-

ing me, I can tell you, were you told to pick me out from among a dozen of fellows sitting round our favourite rendezvous—the camp-fire. There is snow on the ranges all round, and we have lots of ice without troubling the ice-machines, but hot grog is more the fashion than iced champagne.

'We arrived here six weeks ago, *viâ* the Khan Pass, and brought in, among other prisoners, Hadji Khan, a notorious robber and unmitigated rascal. We have him in camp now. He has the most diabolical expression I ever beheld; nevertheless, the length and frequency of his prayers are absolutely astounding. He spends more than half the day on his marrow-bones, no doubt consigning us, in all generations, to Gehenna, if you know where that is?

'The Afghans, take them all in all, are a fine-looking set of men, with bigger frames and fairer skins than the natives of sunny Hindostan. Their physiognomy is decidedly of the Jewish caste—piercing black eyes and hooked noses, set off by a resolute, not to say savage expression of death and extermination to all the Feringhees!

'Now, this cold weather, they are wrapped in poshteens, with or without sleeves, of very dubious cleanliness. A good serviceable garment descends from generation to generation. An enormous dark-blue puggaree encircling a little red cap forms their turban. But the head man of a village, in a richly-embroidered poshteen, "the woolly side in," like the immortal Brian O'Lynn—magnificent gold and blue turban, and long silver-mounted match-lock, is as handsome and picturesque a looking fellow as you could wish to see.

'I have not as yet had an opportunity of beholding an Afghan lady. Some of the common women labour in the fields unveiled, a weather-beaten, bold-looking set, but the lady of the period conceals her charms behind a long white arrange-

ment, that covers her from head to foot, like a sheet; two holes cut for her eyes, and covered with white net, give her a most ghostly and ghastly appearance. She looks like a she-'familiar' of the time of the Inquisition.

'We have a capital mess here, and to find such a dinner as our head kansamah serves up, after whetting our appetites by a twenty-mile ride, is a joy no words can express. After the snow breaks up we are sure to have a short bout of fighting, and then the campaign will be over. The English charger I got in Bombay has turned out first-class —as hard as nails and up to any amount of work. Many thanks to Helen for the Cardigan jacket and mittens. My love to her and the *Limbs*.—Yours as ever, R. M. FAIRFAX.'

In April there was a general move on. The camp at Dabaule was broken up, and everyone was delighted to stretch themselves, as it were, and resume the line of march.

Very shortly afterwards a severe engagement took place between the brigade and a large body of Afghans. It resulted in the total defeat of the latter. Their loss amounted to one thousand, whilst the English force had only three hundred killed and wounded. The Afghans occupied a large plateau protected by walls of loose stones, and held an extremely strong position. The English brigade consisted of the Seventeenth Hussars, Fifth Goorkhas, Twenty-seventh N.I., Fortieth Sikhs, and a battery of artillery. The enemy behaved with the most determined courage, rabble horde as they were; some merely armed with long knives and yataghans, some carrying the dear familiar Jazail, and some—oh, proud and happy men!—the British Enfield rifle. They were led by a man on a powerful black horse, who wore a prodigious green turban, and had his face whitened with ashes

or some such substance. He was a very holy moolah, and harangued the multitude with an energy and vehemence only surpassed by his wild and frenzied gesticulations. Beside him stood his standard-bearer, carrying a large green flag with a red border and red inscription: and in spite of a heavy fire from the infantry, this enormous force of undisciplined fanatics advanced with the utmost steadiness and resolution. The order to charge was given to the hussars, who bore down like a whirlwind, led by Sir Reginald Fairfax—the colonel was *hors de combat* with typhoid fever—who, mounted on a gallant English thoroughbred, cleared the low wall, and was soon laying about him in all directions.

He wrested the standard from the hands of its bearer, and striking him a tremendous blow with its iron pole, laid him low, but was speedily surrounded by some furious fanatics, resolved to regain their colours at any cost. His horse was shot under him; however, quickly disengaging himself, sword in hand, and still grasping the green flag, he made a valiant stand against half-a-dozen moolahs, with his back to some broken masonry. It would have gone hard with him had not some of his men charged down to his rescue and beaten off the moolahs, who in another moment would have made a vacancy in the Seventeenth Hussars and left Lady Fairfax a widow. Rid of his immediate adversaries, Sir Reginald seized a riderless horse, and making over the standard to a gunner, was soon pursuing the flying enemy, who, unable to withstand the cavalry charge, had wavered, broken, and fled; being, moreover, utterly demoralised by the loss of their standard, which they looked upon as their 'oriflamme,' and as a kind of holy talisman, the very sight of which alone would make the hearts of the Feringhees quail. So much had been promised on its behalf by an aged fakir,

who had delivered it over to his countrymen with many prayers and profound solemnity. And it was gone—taken from their very midst by a black-hearted Kaffir, who fought like the Prince of Darkness himself!

The flying Afghans, scattered all over the plain, were pursued and ridden down by the cavalry; but the prize all sought to capture—the fakir on the black Turcoman—set every effort at defiance, and, thanks to his magnificent horse, effected his escape with almost provoking ease. Yaboos, laden with dead Afghans, were driven off the field with miraculous celerity, and within an hour from the firing of the first shot the plain was deserted.

For the capture of the standard 'and displaying conspicuous gallantry on the field of action,' Sir Reginald was recommended for the Victoria Cross, a distinction his friends granted him ungrudgingly.

He was a born soldier, that was very evident. The Fairfaxes had always had a drop of wild blood in their veins. With him it took the form of fighting, instead of—as in his ancestor's times—dicing, drinking, and duelling. His men worshipped him, and would willingly have followed him at any time and to any place, were it to the very gates of Hades itself.

'It's the good old blood that tells in the long run,' remarked a trooper to his comrade over his beer and pipe. 'Such a glutton for fighting as this 'ere major of ours I never did see.'

At any rate, whatever was the reason, such an officer in camp, and such a leader in the field, inspired their utmost devotion and enthusiasm.

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Although Hafiz Khan and his hordes were defeated and dispersed, they speedily rallied sufficiently to be a ceaseless thorn in the flesh to the brigade now permanently encamped within a few

miles of the late scene of action. Hafiz was a striking illustration of the saying, 'He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day.' He was a fakir—exceptionally holy, having made the blessed pilgrimage no less than thrice—notorious alike for his zealous piety, and for his abhorrence of the accursed Kaffir. Scandal whispered that he had not *always* been such a devoted servant of the Prophet; that for years he lived in ill-odour among his neighbours, owing to his constant appropriation of their flocks and herds. Whatever may have been the truth, he was now an ardent patriot, and preyed on the Feringhees, instead of on his friends. He was a most daring and successful raider, and covered himself with glory, notably on one occasion when he carried off seven hundred head of cattle from Jellalabad.

He cut off more convoys and slaughtered more grass-cutters and camel-drivers than any other leader between Cabul and the Khyber; and his depredations were so secretly and skilfully carried out, that his very name alone inspired the stoutest-hearted camp-follower with terror.

Invariably mounted on his superb black Turcoman, he gave chase or effected his retreat with a speed that set everything at defiance. His horse was known by the name of 'Shaitan,' and was supposed to be in direct communication with the Evil One, being imported expressly from the lower regions for the purpose of hunting down the infidels. The rider of this desirable mount was an elderly thick-set man, wearing a gigantic green turban, so large as almost to conceal his features. Still his hooked nose, fierce hawk eye, and bushy beard were visible: and the treacherous, cruel, malignant expression of his face was such as a devil might have envied. Armed with a pair of horse-pistols and a formidable yataghan, he headed a band of followers varying from fifty to two thousand, and

infested an area of many miles in extent. His patriotic zeal had no bounds; he was known to have recently butchered an entire village, merely because the headman had supplied (under strong pressure) cattle and grain to the English commissariat; in short, his name far and near was a byword for ferocity and fanaticism.

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One evening Sir Reginald and his two friends, Captain Vaughan and Mr Harvey, went for a short ride in the neighbourhood of their camp, the former mounted on his first charger, an unusually large, powerful Arab, the two latter on stout Yarkundi ponies. All were clad in Karki suits, and carried (a most necessary precaution) revolvers in their belts. The country around was reported clear. Hafiz and his faction were said to be miles away. Certainly nothing had been heard of them for two whole days. It was a lovely evening, and tempted by the odd wild scenery, they extended their ride farther than they had previously intended. At sunset they found themselves close by a straggling Mohammedan cemetery, whose large square tombs were thickly crowded together, some of them richly carved, some of them poor and plain. The graveyard was planted with magnificent cypresses, now casting long, long shadows in the setting sun. A solemn melancholy silence hung around the place; even the mud hovel, usually inhabited by the guardian fakir, was empty—a huge African dog, with closely-cropped ears and tail, lay in front of the open doorway, sleeping on his post.

'Do you know that they say there is a Christian grave somewhere quite close to this?' said Sir Reginald, looking round. 'I wonder they buried him so near to these people,' nodding his head in the direction of the cemetery.

'Yes,' returned Mr Harvey; 'but it was probably done with an idea that he would like some company.'

'Defend me from the company of an Afghan, dead or alive,' returned his brother-officer, walking his horse on to where he commanded a view of the fourth side of the graveyard. His two friends followed him, and another second brought in sight a grave and plain stone cross, about a hundred yards to their right. Standing beside it was the fakir, in close and earnest conversation with no less a person than Hafiz himself—Hafiz, mounted as usual on his black Turcoman, and *alone!* Both had their backs turned to the cemetery, and stood facing the setting sun, deeply absorbed in conversation, which they emphasised from time to time with vehement and almost frenzied gesticulation. Evidently they were hatching some evil deed.

'Hafiz, by all that is lucky!' exclaimed Sir Reginald, drawing out his revolver and putting his horse into a sharp canter. But between him and the fakirs ran a deep nullah, and ere he reached its bank they were both aware of the presence of the three hussars.

Hafiz paused for a second to glare at the intruders, then raising one arm to heaven, with a loud invocation to Allah, he turned and spat on the cross beneath him with a gesture of the utmost abhorrence and contempt, and wheeling his horse half round, with a derisive farewell to his foes, he started off at full gallop. This outrageous insult to their faith and nation affected the three Englishmen variously. Captain Vaughan, who was of rather full habit, became absolutely purple with passion; Mr Harvey relieved his feelings with several round oaths; Sir Reginald said nothing, but his lips tightened under his dark moustache in a way that was ominous enough. With a vicious dig of the spurs he forced his horse down the rugged sides of the nullah, up the opposite bank, and away across the plain in hot pursuit of the holy man. The two Yarkundis urged to the very

top of their speed, joined neck and neck in the chase for a short distance, but endurance, not pace, was their *forte*, and they soon ceased to answer to the repeated applications of their riders' spurs and Annamullay canes, and began to lag behind the free-going Arab.

'It's no use, Fairfax,' shouted Captain Vaughan, pulling up; 'you'll never overtake him.'

'I will!' he returned, looking back for a second. 'I'll catch him and kill him, if I follow him to Candahar.'

His friends' remonstrances were given to the winds. He had already distanced them by a hundred yards, and soon he and the far-receding fakir became mere specks in the distance, and, rounding the spur of a hill, were completely lost to sight.

The two officers waited impatiently for the sound of shots, but the silence that reigned around them remained unbroken, save for the distant cry of the jackal setting out on his nightly career, and seeming to say more distinctly than usual, 'I smell dead white men, I smell dead white men.'

The whistle of a kite sailing homewards was the only other sound that broke the dead surrounding stillness. The sun had set; ten minutes previously it had vanished below the horizon in the shape of a little red speck; grey twilight was rapidly spreading her mantle over hills and plains, and our two friends, finding they had completely lost sight of their hot-headed companion, reluctantly turned their ponies' heads homewards, and retailed their adventure to their comrades round the camp-fire. These listened to it with many interruptions of surprise and dismay.

'Fairfax was splendidly mounted; that Arab of his was one of the best horses out of Abdul Rahman's stables, that's some comfort,' remarked one.

'Yes, he was evidently gaining on the Turcoman

when we saw the last of him,' returned Mr Harvey; 'but, for all we know, Fairfax has galloped straight into the Afghan camp.'

'I had no idea he was such a Quixotic fool,' growled a grizzly-headed colonel, angrily kicking the logs in front of him. 'It would not surprise *me* if we never saw him again.'

Some said one thing, some another, but all agreed in feeling very grave uneasiness on behalf of their brother-officer.

The mess-bugle sounded and was responded to, dinner was disposed of, and still Fairfax did not appear. Meanwhile Sir Reginald, once lost to sight, had been, as Mr Harvey remarked, overtaking Hafiz at every stride. The Turcoman had done a long day's march, and, though urged by his rider to great exertions, was no match for the well-bred Arab in his wake. The distance between them diminished gradually but surely. The black horse was only leading by thirty yards when Hafiz turned and glanced over his shoulder. It *was*, as he had fancied, the very self-same Kaffir who had taken the sacred standard. They were within half a mile of the Rohilla headquarters, and Allah had surely given him over for a prey into his hand. But his horse was failing, and the Feringhee would soon be at his girths. Best finish the matter at once. Reining up suddenly, he faced the approaching horseman with astonishing celerity, and drawing a pistol, which he aimed for half a second, he fired at him point-blank. The bullet missed its intended destination, and buried itself deep in the brain of the Arab charger, who with one frantic convulsive bound fell forward dead on the sand, and the fakir, with drawn yataghan, charged down on the dismounted hussar, determined to have his life.

But, Hafiz, your evil star was in the ascendant. Had you but known, you would have been far wiser

to have ridden off and left your foe to find his way back to camp on foot, and to take his chance of being murdered by your prowling countrymen.

With an expression of fiendish hatred the fakir rode at Sir Reginald, his uplifted weapon ready to descend with fatal effect. But he had to contend with a man of half his age and of ten times his activity, who sprang at him and seized his arm, and in so doing broke the force of the blow, which, instead of sweeping off our hero's head, as intended, merely inflicted a flesh wound in his shoulder, and before Hafiz had time to recover himself, a bullet from Sir Reginald's revolver found a lodging in his breast. Swaying heavily backwards and forwards, his powerless hands dropped reins and weapon, and he fell from his saddle like a sack; and our hussar, catching the Turcoman by the bridle and disengaging his late master from the stirrup, sprang on his back, turned his head in the direction of the English camp, and rode off at the top of his speed.

His practised ear had caught the sounds of approaching hoofs, attracted doubtless by the shots; but still he had a start of fully a quarter of a mile, and made the very most of it. Infuriated Pathans rode hard upon his track, and it was not till he was well within the lines of the English picket, and saw their camp-fires blazing, that he ventured to draw rein and allow the exhausted Turcoman to proceed at a walk. It does not often happen to a horse to have to carry two successive riders flying for their lives within the same hour. Shaitan's drooping head and heaving sides bore witness to a hard day's work, as he was led by his new owner within the bright circle of light thrown by the officers' camp-fire.

Exclamations, remonstrances, and questions were volleyed at Sir Reginald as once more he stood amongst his friends, bare-headed and ghastly pale,

with the bridle of the notorious black charger hanging over one arm. Very brief were the answers he vouchsafed to half-a-dozen simultaneous interrogations.

'Hafiz was badly wounded, if not dead. He was not likely to trouble them for some time, if ever; his own charger was lying on the plain with a bullet in his brain, and affording a fine supper for the jackals. Yes, he had had to ride for it coming back, and the black was pretty well done.' Here, as he came nearer to the logs, it was seen that one sleeve of his Karki coat was soaked in blood. Questions were immediately at an end, and he was hurried off by the doctor to have his wounds looked to, in spite of his urgent disclaimers and assurances 'that it was a mere scratch.'

The Turcoman, the sight of which acted on the Afghans as a red rag to a turkey-cock, soon became accustomed to an English bit and an English rider, and made his new master a most valuable second charger. Many were the attempts to recover him, to shoot him, to get him from his abhorred Kaffir owner at any price, but all efforts were futile, he was much too well guarded. When Sir Reginald was invalided home, he was sent down to Bombay with his other horses, and sold for a very high price to a hard-riding Member of Council; and doubtless the destination of the once feared and honoured 'Evil One' will be to end his days in a Bombay buggy.

CHAPTER XIV.

'MY CAPTAIN DOES NOT ANSWER; HIS LIPS ARE PALE AND STILL.'

BEYOND constant and most wearisome convoy duty, the Seventeenth Hussars had very little to do. Afghanistan is a country more adapted for mountaineers than mounted men; and as far as downright fighting was concerned, the cavalry were, perforce, idle. Sir Reginald looked upon 'baggage guard' as better than nothing. 'Half a loaf was better than no bread,' and he had more than one exciting little brush with would-be marauding and murdering Pathans.

Repeatedly successful raids and small skirmishes had given him a most unenviable notoriety among the tribes of banditti who infested the various camel-roads and swarmed about the hills. To these he was a perfect scourge, and hunted them and harried them with unwearied energy. It is not too much to say that they literally thirsted for his blood. Although often warned by his brother-officers that he would be 'potted,' his daring and foolhardiness knew no bounds. He would loiter behind, or canter on in advance of a squadron, as coolly as if he were riding on an English highroad, and not through a gloomy Afghan pass, among whose rocks more than one enemy was sitting patiently behind his Jazail or Snider, waiting to work off any straggling Kaffirs, and so to earn for himself an honourable name.

Sir Reginald appeared to bear a charmed life, and thoroughly to carry out the good old Irish motto, 'Where there's no fear there's no danger;' and though he had one or two narrow escapes, he exemplified another saying in his own person, viz., 'That a miss is as good as a mile.'

The tribes in the neighbourhood of the division

to which the hussars belonged had been giving a great deal of trouble, and displaying their hostility in various acts, such as constantly waylaying convoys and cutting off camel-drivers and grass-cutters. Things came to such a pitch that it was determined to bring these wretches to their senses, and a small but compact body was despatched to punish them. It consisted of three squadrons of the Seventeenth, six companies of the Two Hundred and Seventh, about fifty sappers, and three Gatling guns. In moving a larger force there was a difficulty about supplies, and the pace had to be regulated in exact proportion to that of the yaboos with the column; and it was heart-breaking work to keep the poor beasts going.

The march lay at first through a narrow rocky gorge, which, after two hours' steady advance, opened into a wide flat valley that showed abundant evidence of cultivation, including many fields of wheat.

Two or three villages were reached, and proved to be empty; their inhabitants, having had timely warning, had removed themselves and their belongings, and were concealed among the surrounding hills. Late in the afternoon a march of twelve miles brought the troops to the large and important village of Ritsobi. The inhabitants had not long left; but a few sacks of bhoosa, some household cooking-pots, and one or two native ploughs were all that could be discovered; and the soldiers were forced to content themselves with their usual rations, instead of the fowls, eggs, and fruit of which they had had visions.

The two village towers were speedily mined and blown up, and the wooden houses were easily levelled, and afforded capital fuel for the camp-fires, an unusual number of which were soon blazing in all directions.

Standing at the smallest of one of these fires was

Sir Reginald Fairfax, earnestly questioning two Belooch sepoys, who, got up as fakirs, had been playing the part of spies among the enemy. The latter were assembled in formidable numbers about ten miles distant, and meant to hold their ground and await the advance of the column. To look at Sir Reginald as he stood in the firelight, one spurred boot resting on a log of wood, his face and attitude indicating how wholly absorbing he found the sepoys' information, no one would believe that he had a thought in the world apart from his profession. The bright roaring planks lit up his face, already kindled with the news, and the eager, questioning officer before us was as different to the moody, cynical Major Fairfax of Camelabad as night from day.

In spite of hard fare, no better than a trooper's, in spite of being all day in the saddle and half the night on the alert, he had never looked better or cheerier. His constitution appeared to be of iron, and he was perfectly indifferent to cold or heat, hunger or fatigue; or if not, it was assumed that he was. His spirits and energy were untiring. The discomforts of camp life he treated as an excellent joke, and after dining heartily on ration beef and dry bread, and having kept the company entertained with his stories, sallies, and toasts, he would turn in to his seven-foot tent, wrap himself in his military cloak, and with his saddle for a pillow sleep the sleep of the just.

It was determined by the officer in command to steal a march on the enemy, and the force were under orders to set out that night. About one o'clock all the camp was astir. The moon had gone down, but the stars shone brightly — not sufficiently bright, however, to make travelling pleasant, particularly for the cavalry, as the road was cut up by various watercourses and nullahs, in which more than one gallant hussar came to grief,

and fished himself out with imprecations loud and deep.

After marching about eight miles the column came in sight of the enemy's fires, and a halt was made till there was sufficient light to advance. As soon as the first streaks of dawn became visible above the horizon, the cavalry were ordered to the front, and shortly afterwards shots were heard, followed by the rush of hoofs, betokening the flight and pursuit of the picket.

Two miles farther on the force reached a kotal, from whence they could see the valley beneath them. It lay before them, but not 'smiling'—it was sprinkled with large bodies of the enemy, armed to the teeth, who, with standards flying and drums beating, were evidently sounding the tocsin of war. The column halted on a ridge as they saw the Ghazis slowly advancing, and bringing their guns to the front tried the effect of a few shells. The result was excellent. The enemy began to sheer off towards the hills, gradually retiring up the valley. Their movements were so rapid that the cavalry vainly manœuvred to bring them to close quarters; they continued a steady but dignified retreat until they reached a large walled village about three miles up the valley, embedded in hillocks and groves of chunar trees. From rocks and other coigns of vantage a smart fire was opened by the enemy. The Afghan Snider is by no means a bad weapon, and cartridges from the Balar Hissar are not to be despised. Numerous isolated cragsmen among the rocks around the village made very good practice, but the main body of the enemy rounded the base of a hill and completely disappeared. It was generally supposed that they had skedaddled, but this was soon found to be a mistake. It was merely a feint to draw the Feringhees nearer to the village, in order that they might have the benefit of an enormous gun, or kind of matchlock, fired from rests

in the ground. The first time it was fired the proprietors set up a deafening cheer that echoed and re-echoed among the neighbouring hills in quite a startling manner. A second time it fired, a second hideous shout; then the three Gatlings were brought into play, and it was very quickly shut up. At the first two shots from these—to the Afghans, wholly novel inventions—they were too astounded to move; the next two sent them flying in all directions. They seemed to melt away like snow before the sun. Suddenly from behind a hillock a large body of cavalry appeared, and charged irregularly but at full gallop, very pluckily led by a man on a spotted horse, who cheered them on with loud shouts of 'Kaffir! Kaffir!' The hussars, only too delighted to respond to the call, were among them in a twinkling, and the affair was soon cut up into a series of hand-to-hand encounters, in which the irregular cavalry got much the worst of it, although they fought with the utmost fury and determination. The superior arms and weight of the hussars was more than they could contend against; they were scattered, put to flight, and for a short distance hotly pursued. The hussars had eleven men wounded and a number of horses lost or disabled; this was the extent of their casualties. The defeat of their cavalry completed the discomfiture of the enemy, and the village was our own. The whole place was strewn with property left behind by its owners in their hasty retreat. The soldiers had fine times, for each of them had at least one fowl strung to his belt and an unlimited supply of fruit and vegetables. The idea of pursuing the flying foe had to be relinquished; they had taken to the surrounding rocky hills, which they climbed with goatlike agility, and as chamois-hunting on horseback was beyond the ability *even* of the Seventeenth Royal Hussars, they were allowed to continue their flight unmolested. One Ghazi, however, having reached what he con-

sidered a safe elevation, turned and waved his white standard most insolently at the little force below; but a bullet from a Henry-Martini 'dropped him,' and put a fatal termination to him and his evolutions. The infantry now spread all over the village and proceeded to fire it. Several of the larger buildings were already in a blaze, and many surrounding stacks of corn had been given to the flames, when an incident occurred which nearly cost Sir Reginald his life.

As he was cantering down a narrow dusty lane, he observed two men with pickaxes standing in evident hesitation before the closed door of a large square house.

Reining up his horse sharply, he asked what they were about.

'Beg pardon, sir,' replied one of them, saluting him, 'but they say as 'ow the 'ouse is full of Hafghans, all harmed, and we are waiting for a party of the Two Hundred and Seventh before we venture inside, in case what they say is true.'

'We will soon see!' exclaimed Sir Reginald, jumping off his horse and giving the door a vigorous kick—an old rotten door it was—and another kick sent it flying open. An ill-directed volley from several Jazails greeted the intruder, and five Ghazis, armed with tulwars, made for the street.

One of the shots had taken effect in Sir Reginald's left arm, and, parrying a desperate tulwar cut with his revolver, he closed with his assailant; but a frightful blow from the heavy stock of a native gun, delivered from behind, knocked him down insensible, and a Ghazi was just about to give him the *coup de grâce* with a long Afghan knife when the sappers and infantry burst in and overpowered the inhabitants, making very short work of them with bayonet and revolver.

The struggle in which Sir Reginald had been engaged had not lasted more than half a minute,

and when his men came up to the scene of action, and found him to all appearance dead, their fury and grief knew no bounds. Two wounded Ghazis, who had been granted quarter, relinquished all hopes of life when they saw the many fierce and murderous looks that were turned on them; and when the general, his aide-de-camp, and one of the officers of the hussars came galloping up, and they saw their faces and gestures of consternation, they felt the gratifying conviction that any rate they had killed a Kaffir of some importance.

He certainly looked as if he were dead as he lay in the narrow little street, with his head resting on the knee of his brother-officer. His eyes were closed, over his face the pallor of death seemed already to be creeping. His blue and gold uniform was torn and disfigured with dust and blood, and his left arm hung by his side in such a helpless, unnatural position that it did not need a second glance to see that it was badly broken. However, he was *not* dead, only badly wounded and insensible. He was carried in a dhooly to the permanent camp (a two days' march), and the several doctors of the brigade held a consultation on his case, whilst his anxious friends, brother-officers and men alike, hung around the tent waiting for the verdict. Great was their relief to hear that, if fever did not supervene, there was nothing serious to be apprehended, but that it would be many a day before Sir Reginald would again wield a sabre.

Still, for some time his state was very precarious, and many were the inquiries that beset the medical officer in attendance on the patient. He was a short, round-about, elderly man, with beetling brows and a gruff voice, but underneath his rough, rude exterior there lurked a really kind heart.

As he was leaving the hospital one morning he was accosted by two of the 'boys' of the Seventeenth, who overwhelmed him with anxious inquiries.

'How is Fairfax this morning?' they asked, in a breath.

The doctor rubbed his chin and looked at them reflectively. The two youths were connected in his mind with reminiscences of not an altogether agreeable nature; one of them, who bore the *sobriquet* of 'Buttons,' being about the cheekiest and coolest young gentleman he had ever come across, and both displayed an extraordinary aptitude for practical jokes.

'He is not going to give you a step *this* time,' replied the doctor brusquely, preparing to pass on.

'A step. I would not *take* it if he did,' returned Buttons vehemently, standing right in front of the doctor.

'Oh, not you!' retorted the medico scornfully. 'Fairfax would—nay, if he has a relapse, will—give three steps. As things are now, a man must stand on his comrade's grave for promotion, and you are just the very last young gentleman to keep yourself in the background. You would take the step sharp enough if you got the chance and were not passed over.'

'I don't know about stepping on Fairfax's grave, as you call it,' replied Buttons, crimson with anger; 'but I know some people's graves I could dance on with pleasure,' accompanying the remark with a look of the utmost significance.

'Ah, you don't really mean it? Why are you all in such a desperate state about this fellow? Why is *he* singled out as an object of so much anxiety and attention? Generally, when a man dies up here, it is not "Poor So-and-so is dead, I'm awfully sorry," but "So-and-so is dead—what kind of a kit had he?" And away you all tear and bid for his things before the breath is hardly out of his body! Why such great concern about this young major? He has a first-class kit, as kits go, and a couple of good sound horses.'

'You are quite a new-comer, Dr Bennett,' said the other hussar, who had not hitherto spoken. 'Only a recent arrival,' very loftily, 'or you would not talk like this. Fairfax keeps us all going.' Then warming to his subject, 'He is the best fellow in the world, always thinking for others, always doing the work of three. He looks after the men; he manages the mess; he—'

'Ah, *now* I can understand your anxiety,' interrupted Dr Bennett, contracting his fierce brows. 'The light breaks at last! The squalid feeding that is set before us, the horribly mysterious joints and leather steaks are now accounted for. The mess butler has it all his own way now that the mess president is sick!'

'You are quite welcome to adopt this view of the subject if you like,' said hussar Number Two very angrily; 'to *some* people their food is the only object of interest.'

'Well, well,' said the doctor, surveying the two wrathful young faces before him, and bursting into a loud laugh, 'I must try and patch up this interesting patient of mine for many reasons, chiefly because he understands the art of snubbing bumptious boys and keeping them in their places. I am sure it is a mercy that someone can control them, for it is a task that is utterly beyond *me*,' muttered the gallant surgeon-major, as he walked rapidly away to his eagerly-anticipated breakfast.

There had been a struggle among Sir Reginald's friends for the post of chief nurse; but his own man Cox would not yield the place to anyone, and they found their would-be office a sinecure. An excellent, firm, and gentle nurse himself, a worse patient than Sir Reginald could scarcely be found! So impatient of being kept in bed, so restless in it—tossing and tumbling to and fro, regardless of his wounded arm. Perfectly deaf to all blandishments that induced him to take proper medicine

and nourishment, he would have his own way, and he had it, driving his nurses to their wits' end, and throwing himself into a fever.

One night, at the very height of his illness, when he was lying in a kind of stupor, the doctor came in on his way from mess and felt his pulse and temperature. Standing at the foot of the camp-bed, he eyed his patient dubiously for some moments.

'This will never do,' he said, after an ominous silence. 'If he goes on like this he will slip through our fingers. His pulse and temperature are past counting. I am afraid he is in a bad way, poor fellow! Some of you had better write to his friends this mail and prepare them. He may pull through, but the chances are very much the other way. I'll look in again in the course of an hour or two.' So saying, without waiting for a reply of any kind, he turned on his heel and departed.

Captain Vaughan and Mr Harvey declared over and over to each other that they did not agree with the doctor, but each made a mental reservation to himself: 'Their patient was certainly *not* mending.' As they glanced anxiously towards him, they were more than ever struck by his worn and sunken features, his hurried, laboured breathing, and the startling contrast between his dark hair and the ghastly paleness of his face. 'Wali,' Sir Reginald's Afghan dog, a great shaggy monster, something like a collie, with dark-grey coat and pointed ears, sat on his haunches, with his nose resting on the bed, surveying his master with grave, inquiring eyes. To judge from his solemn, sorrowful face, he thought as badly of the patient as did his human friends. The two officers had not forgotten the doctor's injunction, and proceeded to search over the tent for keys, desk, letters, and addresses. They found a small and

most unpresuming little leather desk, which they turned out and ransacked. It contained paper and envelopes, some letters, and a cheque-book, but not one of the letters was in a lady's hand, or bore the signature of Fairfax. After some discussion they agreed to write to the Honourable Mark Mayhew, who seemed a frequent correspondent. As they were tumbling out the contents of the desk they came upon a cabinet photograph, a half-length likeness of a slender girl in a white dress, with a smile in her eyes, and a fox-terrier in her arms.

'Hullo!' exclaimed Mr Harvey, stooping to pick up the carte from where it had fallen on the floor, face upwards. 'I say, who is this?' regarding the treasure-trove with wide-open eyes.

'That is his *wife!*' replied Captain Vaughan, looking over his comrade's shoulder. 'Is she not lovely?'

'Lovely indeed!' replied Mr Harvey, refusing to let the photo out of his hand, and gazing at it with the eyes of a connoisseur. 'I don't wonder now that Fairfax turned up his nose at the pale-faced beauties of Camelabad! *Now* I can understand his contempt for our taste, and the commiseration with which he regarded us when we talked of beauty.'

'If anything does happen to him, poor fellow,' said Captain Vaughan, nodding towards the patient, 'I suppose it will be an awful blow to her; but I must confess I can't make head or tail of his domestic affairs. You may be sure there is something queer about her, or he would never stay out here alone, and he never alludes to his wife any more than if she was dead. There is a screw loose somewhere, believe me.'

'You saw her on board the trooper, Vaughan; is she really as pretty as this?' murmured Mr Harvey, still wholly absorbed in the photograph.

'*Much* prettier,' returned his companion briefly. 'Here! you can't go on staring at that all night!

We must set to work and write this letter ; the mails go down to-morrow morning. I don't half like the job, I can tell you ; and if anything *does* happen to Fairfax '—here he winked away an unusual moisture from his bold blue eyes—' I shall be frightfully cut up myself.'

The two officers having at length put their heads together, concocted the following letter to Mr Mayhew :—

'DEAR SIR,—It is with much regret that I inform you of the very serious illness of Sir Reginald Fairfax, and I have been desired by the doctor in attendance to prepare you for the gravest consequences. Sir Reginald was wounded by some Ghazis after the capture of a village, he having had the foolhardiness to enter their house alone, knowing it to be full of armed men. He has a broken arm, and is only slowly recovering from concussion of the brain caused by a blow on the back of his head ; and latterly he has had to contend with a severe attack of malarious fever. I need hardly mention that he has the best attention of my brother-officers and myself, and everything that can be done for him in such an out-of-the-way part of the world has been most carefully carried out. We can only hope and trust that his youth and vigorous constitution may yet assert themselves and shake off the fever now wasting him away. I have been unable to find his wife's address ; will you be so good as to break the news to her, or forward this letter to her residence ? —Yours faithfully, GEORGE VAUGHAN.'

No sooner had the above been concluded, closed, and stamped, than the patient suddenly woke up in his senses. After languidly gazing at his friends for some time, his eyes fell on his rifled desk and his wife's photograph. To his gesture of amazement Captain Vaughan hurriedly replied,—

'Fairfax, my dear fellow, I know you think we have been guilty of the greatest liberty; but we had to ferret out your friends' address by the doctor's orders.'

'Had you? Am I so bad as all *that?*' he asked, in a low tone. Receiving no reply, he added, as if to himself, 'I suppose I am, I feel very weak and queer; but I must write a line myself,' he said, looking at Captain Vaughan gravely.

'Nonsense! It would be sheer madness. I won't allow it. One of us will write at your dictation.'

'No, no! Impossible!' he answered, firmly. 'Not to my wife. I must write to *her* at any cost,' he continued, raising himself feebly; and taking her photo in his hand, he gazed at it long and wistfully, then laid it down with a sigh.

'Get me a draught of that fizzing mixture, please, and fix me up so that I can write.'

Having carried his point, as usual, he commenced, with great labour, to trace a few lines, the beads of perspiration on his forehead testifying to the effort they cost him. Ere he had written twenty words the pen dropped from his fingers, and he fell back on the pillow completely exhausted.

'I see it is no use,' he muttered to himself. Then looking earnestly at Captain Vaughan, he said, '*You* are going home; go and see her. Take her my watch and sword, they will do for the boy.' He faltered, and his voice sank so low that his friend could hardly catch his next almost inaudible words; they were, 'Tell her I forgive her; tell her I loved her always; tell—' Here his message came to an end, for he had fainted.

Great was the consternation of his friends, the wrath of the hastily-summoned doctor, the smothered indignation of Cox.

The patient remained unconscious for a considerable time, and when he came to himself he fell into a deep sound sleep which lasted for hours.

at least in plenty of room. Upstairs the house was still more old-fashioned than below; fireplaces in corners abounded; cupboards broke out in the strangest places; and there were various passages leading everywhere in general and nowhere in particular, as you angrily discover when, having followed one down to its source as you flatter yourself, you open a fine promising-looking door, and find a set of empty shelves staring you in the face! On the other hand, you are disagreeably surprised when, on bursting open the door of what you take to be a cupboard, you find yourself precipitated headlong down three steps into a large room. Huge four-post beds and furniture to correspond were *de rigueur*, and there was an old-world feeling about the place altogether, as if it had gone to sleep one hundred years ago, and awoke, greatly surprised to find itself in the present century. Everything was antiquated, with the exception of new carpets and curtains in the sitting-room, a few fashionable chairs and tea-tables, Alice's piano, and the furniture of her bedroom, where a modern brass construction relieved the time-honoured four-poster, and a writing-table, wardrobe, and lounge took the place of furniture that would have been the *ne plus ultra* of luxury in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Need I here mention that the maiden monarch slept a night at Monkswood? According to the number of places which boast of this honour, Her Majesty can have rarely passed a night at home.

The house was overrun with old china, and there were a good many family portraits, simpering and scowling, about the walls. The best—the beauties and the handsome cavaliers—were all at Looton; but frosty-faced old divines and plain elderly matrons had been left undisturbed. There was some Chippendale furniture too, and all kinds of queer old ornaments, odds and ends, and even *clothes*, stowed away carefully among the venerable wardrobes; in

fact, enough unappreciated *bric-à-brac* to turn a collector's head.

The pleasure-grounds opened through a rustic gate into the plantations, which skirted the whole demesne inside a high wall. Through the plantations ran a walk just wide enough for two. A dense growth of underwood gave cover to thousands of rabbits, and where the ground was visible it was one mass of bluebells and primroses in the season.

Opening also out of the pleasure-grounds was a large old-fashioned garden, chiefly devoted to fruit and vegetables, though the broad gravel walks that intersected it were lined with wall-flowers, carnations, lavender, and hollyhocks. Its four grey walls did not look down upon a 'wealth of flowers,' but they were covered with very excellent fruit trees, and they overlooked the best beds of asparagus within a radius of ten miles.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.

ALICE had found all prepared for her reception at Monkswood. A moderate staff of servants, culled from Looton, was awaiting their arrival. They accorded her a cold, not to say sullen, welcome; as they unanimously blamed her, and her alone, for their master's sudden freak of shutting up Looton and sailing for India. Their attitude of dignified disapproval was entirely thrown away on their young mistress, who spent most of her time out of doors, and quickly accustomed herself to a life of complete solitude. In company with her dog Tory, a fox-terrier, given her by her husband before she was married, she would spend hours roaming through the garden and pleasure-grounds, and,

above all, the woods. They had a special attraction for her—she liked their aromatic piny smell, and they were leafless, deserted and dreary, and seemed exactly to match her own frame of mind. Here, in utter solitude and silence, only broken by the snapping of a twig beneath her feet, the flutter of a falling leaf, or the short sharp barks of Tory in hot pursuit of a rabbit, she could think without interruption.

To Tory these woods were Elysium itself, and his most happy hunting-grounds. Although always baffled by the agile bunny, he returned to the chase each day with renewed enthusiasm. As he sat, much out of breath, on his haunches directly in front of his mistress, seated on a log, his eyes rolling, his tongue lolling, and his sides palpitating, perhaps he wondered in his own mind what could be the matter with her. Why did those great round drops roll down her cheeks and go splash on her sealskin coat and small clasped hands? Why did she take him up, and hug him, and kiss him, and say, 'Tory, no one in all the world loves me as well as you do'?

Although Alice had spoken to Geoffrey of her husband's departure with easy indifference, her indifference was assumed. Her heart quailed when she thought of India, sickness, and the field of action. Each day, instead of deadening, only intensified her grief. It will be seen that her feelings towards her husband had undergone a revulsion, and since she had been out of the hearing of Miss Fane's oracular sayings, her opinion of his misdeeds had become greatly modified. If he were utterly innocent, as in her secret heart she began to believe, what was to be her fate? Twice he had given her an opportunity to make amends, and twice she had declined the olive branch. She would never have another chance, *that* was very certain.

As she looked down the dreary path before her, strewn with fallen leaves and branches, at the bare,

gaunt, grey and brown trees interlaced overhead, it was not a cheerful prospect; and yet a far more dismal vista presented itself to her mind's eye. A long, solitary, monotonous life at Monkswood, where youth and beauty would alike fade away unnoticed and unregretted; her husband implacable, following with ardour his beloved profession; her friends indifferent and forgetful; what a miserable existence seemed to be in store for her! Could the haughty, stern man, who had so bitterly upbraided her on Southsea Pier, and bidden her such a cold and almost contemptuous farewell, have been the bridegroom who had sauntered by her side through the deep green glades of the forest of Fontainebleau? It seemed impossible. What delightful mornings they had spent among those old trees—she with her work, he lying at her feet reading aloud Tennyson, *Punch*, *Galignani*, whatever came first; what rambles they had taken among French farms and fields, exchanging tastes, opinions, confidences; what delightful drives and excursions they had made in the neighbourhood, exploring the country in every direction, losing their way, stopping to dine at little out-of-the-way villages, and meeting with numerous amusing adventures.

Then there had been that short trip through Normandy, and home by the Channel Islands; and what a welcome she had received at Looton! —rich and poor testified their regard for its master by the reception they gave his bride. How proud he had seemed of her in those days, as, dressed in one of Worth's gowns, which he had helped to choose in Paris, he led her up to the Duchess of Dover, who was giving a ball in their honour—the very last she had been at. How she had enjoyed it too, although Reginald never danced with her *once*, telling her, when she remonstrated with him as they went home in the brougham, 'That he did not approve of bride and bridegroom dancing to-

gether, as they had quite enough of each other's company, and might spare a few hours to the claims of society;' and he had cut short all her arguments with a kiss. She remembered saying to him the day that Geoffrey had been expected, 'I suppose we may consider our honeymoon over now?' 'No,' he had replied, 'I hope ours will last as long as we live, and that, no matter what happens, we shall never love each other less than we do at present. I can answer for myself, at any rate,' he had said, emphatically.

Rash promise! Three months of unutterable happiness, and all was over! That he *had* loved was certain. Never a very demonstrative lover; yet a look, a word, a caress from him were ten times more precious from their rarity, and because they bore the stamp of a tender, almost reverent affection, than if another man of more shallow feelings had overwhelmed her with perpetual adoration.

Such thoughts as these, and such happy recollections, only made the contrast between past and present trebly painful. Day by day, Alice became more miserably unhappy. She spent her time aimlessly wandering about the woods or sitting indoors before the fire, with Tory on her lap, talking half to him and half to herself. Society she had none: with the exception of the clergyman's family, the neighbours and county held completely aloof, and left her entirely to her own devices. They knew that Sir Reginald had gone abroad, that Looton was shut up. 'There is something very mysterious about the whole thing,' they said, 'and we will not be in a hurry to call on Lady Fairfax.'

Consequently Lady Fairfax was left entirely to herself.

At last Alice made up her mind to write to her husband. She could no longer believe in that false marriage certificate; it was all a wicked lie from first to last. Oh that she had thought so before!

She had determined to abase herself before him and entreat his pardon. These feelings came to a climax one dim spring afternoon, and, hastily glancing at the paper, she saw that it was mail-day. She had just half-an-hour before post time, and so she hurriedly sat down and wrote a short but truly penitent and loving letter to Sir Reginald (the fate of which will afterwards be disclosed).

'What a change in her life that single sheet of foreign paper might make,' she thought, as she kissed it and folded it, and enclosed in it two or three violets taken from a little bunch in front of her dress. Ere the letter had gone out of the house a load seemed lifted off her mind. In eight weeks at most the answer would come back; and the foolish girl sat down on the hearthrug and began to reckon up the days!

'He will come back himself,' she whispered to Tory, as he laid his head on her arm and blinked his eyes sagaciously. 'And how glad we shall be to see him, Tory, you and I! He will sit between us here, at the fire, and he will scold me. He will lecture me dreadfully, Tory, but he is sure to be very pleased with you. I will tell him what a good boy you have been, and how you have kept me company.'

In vain she watched and waited for an answer to her letter. Every morning, wet or dry, accompanied by Tory, she walked to the avenue-gates, and herself received the postbag. How she looked out for the arrivals of the mails *viâ* Brindisi, and reckoned up the days and hours till her much desired letter could come! When the allotted two months had elapsed, and it did not appear, hope instead of being silent, told a still more flattering tale.

'He is coming himself; he may be here any day,' it said. For days, and even weeks, Alice deluded herself with this idea. A step, the sudden opening of a door, made her start and flush crimson. But

time went on, her boy was born, and still no letter; so her heart hardened once more. Not only was she herself slighted and despised, but what outraged her feelings in their most sensitive point, her child was ignored. 'He might have sent me even one little line; he is barbarous, cruel, unnatural,' were some of her bitter reflections.

Miss Saville, a good-tempered, sensible elderly lady, very fond of her niece, had come to Monkswood, and with her a new *régime* commenced; no more untouched meals, no more 'moping,' as she called it, permitted. But now that Alice had her baby to engross her mind, she was not so much inclined to live in the past as in the present. When she did think of her husband, it was with an indescribable mixture of remorse, indignation, and regret. The 'confessions' from Cheetapore were duly forwarded to Alice, and were safely locked up in her dressing-case; but as he had not deigned to take any notice of her abject apology *before* the matter had been cleared up, it was unnecessary to trouble him with another appeal, even supposing her own pride would have permitted a second abasement, which it would not.

When not occupied in the nursery, Alice spent a good deal of time in taking long rides in the neighbourhood. In company with Martin, the old family groom, she scoured the country for miles far and near, very much to her own enjoyment and greatly to the indignation of the surrounding *élite*, who had no idea that a young woman sent to Monkswood by her husband in the deepest disgrace should be permitted so much relaxation and amusement. Her horses were first-rate, her riding undeniable, and once in the saddle she half forgot her troubles, and seemed more like herself once more. The perfect equanimity with which she met the cold, hard stare of the county people, and the inimitable grace with which she managed her

thoroughbred, made them feel—the ladies especially—more wickedly disposed towards her than ever.

The whisper of scandal was busy with her name in a way that she, poor girl, had little idea of; and stories were circulated that would have made her absent husband's blood boil had he only known. The accepted legend was, 'that she had been on the point of eloping with her cousin, Mr Saville, during her husband's temporary absence; that he had fortunately returned just in time to frustrate their plans, and, to save a public *esclandre* and the Fairfax good name, had relegated his erring wife to Monkswood, and had himself volunteered for the East.'

'But she is all the same as a *divorcée*. He has left her for ever,' her kind neighbours whispered over their five-o'clock tea; 'and she is not to be tolerated in Steepshire society.'

The Mayhews occasionally sent Sir Reginald's missives to his wife, and she observed that, although her boy was often alluded to with interest and affection, her own name was never mentioned. She had done violence to her pride in sending him Maurice's photograph, and he had treated it with the same disdain as her letter.

When the Afghan war broke out, all his epistles to Mark or Helen were regularly forwarded to her, and she received the news of his having gained the Victoria Cross with a pride that she did not attempt to conceal; but her fears and anxieties far outweighed any pleasure the intelligence afforded her. It did not delight her to hear that he had gained the *sobriquet* of 'Fighting Fairfax'—far from it; and when Captain Vaughan's letter arrived, her agony was beyond description. How she bore the miserable week that intervened before the next mail was only known to herself. She endured in silence, opening her heart to no one—taking no one into her confidence; not shedding a single tear, but

going about her usual duties with a white set face that fairly frightened her aunt. 'If he is dead,' she would say to herself as she paced her room, 'he has gone without forgiving me. As I stand here he may be already weeks in his lonely foreign grave, and I, without knowing it, am his *widow*. If this is the case, I believe it will kill me.' Never very robust at any time, she looked now so worn, so thin, so altered, even with the suspense of less than a week, that it seemed as if it would not take much to snap her hold on life.

She heard from the Mayhews of her husband's approaching return, and saw by his letters how very reluctant he was to come home.

He little knew that his wife's eyes would rest on the lines he was penning when he said,—

'I have no wish to return to England; I am ten times happier out here than I shall be at home; and excepting to see you and Helen, and my son and heir, I do not wish to set foot on my native land for years. All my interests and all I care about most are bound up in the fortunes of the Seventeenth Royal Hussars. I hope to get command of the regiment ere long, and if I do I would not change places with any king or emperor you could name.'

Alice read the above with apparent composure and handed it back to Helen, to whom she was paying a short visit. Indignation and disappointment were depicted in her face, in spite of her heroic efforts to appear indifferent. She went and stood at the window, to hide the tears that would come into her eyes.

'He does not mean it, Alice,' said Helen soothingly.

'It is nothing to me whether he does or not,' replied Alice hotly; 'but he does mean it—at any rate we will not talk about him.' Then continued, with womanly consistency, 'I can read between

the lines of that letter. *I* am the cause of his reluctance to come home; he does not wish to be in the same country with me; he hates to remember that he is a married man; he is afraid that we shall meet; but he need not be. England is wide enough for both of us, and I have no desire to see a husband who has completely ignored me for nearly three years.' So saying, and rapidly collecting her hat, umbrella, and gloves (having just come in from the park), she swept indignantly out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE.

THREE years had made a wonderful change in Alice: she was a very different Alice to what she had been when we first saw her at Malta. Her naturally high spirits and elastic temperament had been almost totally subdued and crushed by the life of retirement and isolation she had led. She felt, although barely twenty-one, as if she had already lived her life: the happiness, gaiety, and domestic sunshine, the common lot of girls of her age, were not for her, an outcast from society, a deserted wife. Sometimes her youth and natural buoyancy would assert themselves, and she would find herself singing and laughing as of old, especially as she played with Maurice, and allowed him to drive her as his willing steed up and down the passages and round the garden; but such were rare occasions.

The mistress of Monkswood was a tall, slight, dignified young lady, who often inspired her aunt with awe by the gravity of her demeanour, and who found it hard to realise that she and the madcap child of former years were one and the same indi-

vidual. She utterly refused to leave Monkswood, and, with the exception of a flying visit to the Mayhews, had never been away from home for one night. Nor did she encourage people to stay with her, saying she had no inducement to offer, and that it was much too stupid at Monkswood to repay anyone the trouble of coming so far.

At length her aunt, Miss Saville, greatly concerned by her niece's listlessness and dejection, took upon herself to invite Miss Ferrars, one of Alice's former companions, on a long visit. 'The young,' she rightly argued, 'like the young; her former schoolfellow will cheer her up. After all, an old woman like myself is no companion for a girl from one year's end to another.'

Miss Ferrars duly arrived at Monkswood. She was a year older than Lady Fairfax, a clever, warm-hearted girl, with untiring spirits and energy. She was tall and well developed, and looked twice as much the matron as her slim, girlish hostess. She had a pleasant, intelligent, rather than handsome face, with sparkling brown eyes, and quantities of beautiful bronze-coloured hair. She was unaffectedly surprised at the change in her former schoolfellow. Could this silent, grave, melancholy-looking young lady be indeed the bright Alice of Rougemont, who used to keep them all alive with her bright face and gay sallies?

Soon they relapsed into their old groove, however, going over their former experiences with mutual pleasure. Professor, schoolfellows, examinations, places, and people were reviewed and discussed, and Alice took her friend into her confidence on every subject save one. Her Bluebeard's closet, her sealed book, was her husband's name, and *that* she always most scrupulously avoided. To her friend's inquiries about him her answers were cold and brief; her short married career she never touched upon, and Mary Ferrars having in-

directly heard that Sir Reginald did not 'get on' with his wife, and was anything but a highly-domesticated animal, seeing that he had been abroad for nearly three years, never alluded to him again.

Miss Ferrars and Alice shared the same room, and though they would lie awake talking for hours in the most approved young-lady fashion, nothing had escaped Alice's lips that gave her friend any clue to the mystery which enshrouded her husband. She roused herself for the entertainment of her schoolfellow, and became every day more like her old self. She purchased a tame, sedate steed for her use, and gave her riding lessons, and together they explored the neighbourhood. They got up a lawn-tennis in the pleasure-grounds, where they played half their mornings, making Maurice very useful in fetching the balls.

Maurice was now a young gentleman in belted blouse, sturdy and well-made. He had a fair, broad forehead, dark eyes, dark lashes, and dark curls. He already possessed a very decided will of his own, and was absolute master of all the womankind on the premises, from Alice to the cook inclusive.

The two young ladies had effected a great change in the interior of the house. The drawing-room was now a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. They had routed out old pictures and hung them on the walls; the Chippendale furniture had been brought to the front, and some beautiful old china had been arranged on a venerable black buffet that had been discovered in the laundry; more plates and dishes were affixed to the walls on velvet shields; in fact, the drawing-room and tea-room were their mutual hobby, and became two of the most charming apartments possible to see, with polished floors and Persian rugs.

June and July passed—a vision of hot, sweet-

scented, languid summer days. Then came August; and August brought a visitor to Monkswood.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Sir Reginald had landed at Southampton and made his way to London, where he was rapturously received by the inmates of Wessex Gardens. They thought him graver, thinner, and very much sunburnt from the voyage, but otherwise he was the same as ever. The day following his arrival he produced presents for all the Mayhew family—an Afghan matchlock and knife for Mark; a Cashmere tea-set and shawl for Helen; toys, puzzles, and sweetmeats for the children.

Helen, having tried on her shawl and viewed herself with much complacency in all the mirrors and from every point of view, came over to where Sir Reginald was explaining a puzzle to the children, and throwing herself into a chair opposite, said abruptly,—

'And what have you brought Alice?'

'Alice!' he stammered, reddening even through the sunburn to the roots of his crisp dark hair. Then immediately recovering himself, replied, as he stooped to pick up a piece of the puzzle which had fallen on the floor,—'Oh, nothing.'

'Has he not brought her *himself* and his V.C.?' said Mark, giving him a tremendous slap on the back. 'What more could she desire?'

'I am not so humble as to consider myself *nothing*, whatever you may think of me, Mark,' he returned, without raising his eyes from the puzzle, which he had just completed in the neatest manner; and, holding it out on the palm of his hand, he said,—'Now, Hilda, if you put this together before dinner this evening, I'll give you the biggest box of chocolate you ever saw. I'm off to the club now,' he added, standing up and preparing to depart, cleverly eluding the fire of cross questions with which Helen was preparing to attack him.

For several days he evaded all her attempts to inveigle him into a *tête-à-tête;* his engagements were so numerous that he was seldom at home, for all his old friends flocked round him, and he was the hero of the hour. Dozens of invitations came daily pouring in, and he seemed to be fairly launched in London society, and carried away by its current. Helen, like the hen whose duckling had taken to the water, looked on in impotent despair. The highest in the land, the beauties of the season, were all equally ready to engage his time. As she saw him in the Row, the centre of a circle of former brother-officers, then beckoned to the carriage of one of the belles of the season, who engaged him in most animated and *empressé* conversation, she said to herself,—'This will never do; has he forgotten that he has a home and a wife, or does he mean to ignore both completely?' She sought in vain for opportunities to sound him on the subject: he never was with her alone. All her little hints about Alice, all her endeavours to bring her name into conversation, were completely fruitless; he exhibited a skill in avoiding this one particular theme, a dexterity that irritated and amazed her. At length, after he had been nearly a fortnight in London, Helen made up her mind to stand this state of affairs no longer. Accordingly, the evening when he was dining at the Guards' Club, she waited up for him in her boudoir. Hearing him leisurely ascending the stairs between one and two o'clock, she went out into the corridor and beckoned him into her room, saying,—

'Come in here, Regy; I want to speak to you.'

Strangling a yawn, and laying down his candlestick, he flung himself into the nearest arm-chair with a mock tragic gesture, and said,—'Say on.'

It was all very well to say 'Say on,' but how was she to begin? Now that she had caged her bird she began to realise the delicate task that lay

before her. She well knew that it was a proverbially thankless and dangerous mission to interfere between husband and wife; and Regy, although he had often stood a little boy at her knee, and come to her with all his grievances, was now a man, known to be clever, distinguished, and thoroughly able to think and act, not only for himself but for others. How well he looked in his mess-dress, so bronzed, soldierlike, and handsomer than ever! He was leaning back with his arms clasped behind his head, regarding her with lazy amusement.

She must begin, she thought, *somehow*, and forthwith broke the ice clumsily enough by saying, 'Had you a pleasant evening, Regy?'

'A pleasant evening!' he echoed. 'Why, you foolish old lady, you never mean to say that you have sat up till nearly two o'clock to ask me such a question?'

'No, not quite,' she replied, laughing nervously. 'The truth is, Regy—and don't think I am inhospitable, or want to turn you out, or anything—' And she paused.

'Well, and what is the truth, as you call it?' he asked, brusquely.

'When are you going to Monkswood?'

'To Monkswood!' he repeated, suddenly sitting erect and looking at her fixedly. 'That is easily answered—never!'

'Oh, Reginald, you can't mean it! Do you not wish to see Alice or your boy?'

'We will not speak of Alice, if you please,' he said, gravely. 'I have nothing to say to her; but you must manage that I shall see the boy somehow, Helen,' he added, eagerly. 'Could you get him up here for a few days? I'm off to Norway with Fordyce the end of the month.'

'I am quite *sure* that Alice would never allow him out of her sight, and I will never have him here without his mother. Do you mean me to

understand that you will not suffer me to speak to you about her?' she asked, hotly.

'I do. Not even with you, Helen, my more than sister, will I discuss my wife—that was.'

'Then,' exclaimed Helen, with rising indignation, 'things are at a deadlock! Alice will not speak of you to anyone, you will not suffer me to mention her name, and neither of you will have anything to say to the other. I know I could reconcile you both, were you not so inconceivably proud and stiff-necked.'

'Look here, Helen,' he said, rising and beginning to pace about the room, 'I know you mean well and kindly, but take my advice and leave us alone. We get on best apart. Our marriage was a tremendous blunder: we both know that *now*. I have endeavoured to forget that I have ever had a wife. Alice and I are utter *strangers*. As her guardian, I have taken excellent care of her interests, and studied her comfort and happiness as far as it is in my power; but as her *husband*' (and he emphasised the word), 'I have done with her.'

Hitherto he had been walking up and down the room, but as he concluded he came to a full stop before Mrs Mayhew, who, rising, and stretching out her plump white hands towards him with a gesture of dismay, said,—

'You are mad, Reginald, to talk like this! You do not know *what* you are saying. It is very easy to repudiate your wife to *me*; but when you do it publicly what will people say? Have you thought of that? What would you yourself say of a young couple who married for love separated almost in their honeymoon, the husband to go to India, the wife to shut herself up in the country?'

'I would say nothing,' he interrupted. 'Why should I?'

'Wait! I have not finished,' she continued, hastily. 'The husband, after an absence of three

years, returns; comes to London, mixes freely in society, but never goes to see his young wife. You must remember,' she pursued, literally buttonholing him by his mess-jacket, 'that you are Alice's guardian as well as her husband; she has no father or mother, nor any relation in the world to protect her good name except yourself and Geoffrey, and he is only a boy.'

'Geoffrey!' he exclaimed, contemptuously.

'You don't know what you are doing, Regy,' she pleaded. 'If you go abroad, as you have arranged, without seeing Alice, you will do her a great injury in the eyes of the world. Your friends know that there is an estrangement between you; at least, for the sake of appearances, patch up a truce at any rate.'

'I am not a hypocrite, and I will do nothing of the kind,' he muttered, angrily, drawing back and endeavouring to release himself from his cousin's grasp.

It was useless; she was a pertinacious woman, and she *would* be heard.

'Do not go,' she entreated. 'I never see you alone now, and I must gain my point—I must indeed. You *will* hear me. It is all very well to say you have ceased to think of Alice as your wife—which I do not believe—but, at any rate, you cannot forget that she is the mother of your child, can you?' she asked, with an air and emphasis that would not have disgraced Mrs Siddons.

No reply. 'Silence gives consent, I see,' she nodded triumphantly as she continued; 'and as the mother of your child, surely you would wish her to be honoured and respected, if not for her own sake at least for his?'

An impatient gesture of assent was all his reply.

'Think of the life of retirement and seclusion she has led; surely that has been punishment enough?'

'Who is talking of punishment?' he exclaimed, forcibly removing Helen's hand. 'Alice is her own mistress, to come and go as she pleases.'

'She has never left home nevertheless, in spite of all our invitations, with the exception of a short visit this spring. You don't know the *furore* she created; we used to be quite mobbed walking in the Row.'

A very unamiable scowl was the only notice he deigned to this remark.

'You have no idea how lovely she is,' she urged, impressively.

'Have I not?' he replied, dryly.

'No; how can you?—you have not seen her for ages. She is greatly changed in every way—no longer the giddy, impulsive girl you remember. If you only knew how *distracted* she was when you were so dangerously wounded!'

'Pray how can you tell?' he asked, with raised brows and a certain amount of sarcastic incredulity in his expression.

'I know all about it from Miss Saville. She told me that during the week that followed Captain Vaughan's letter, Alice fretted away to half her size, and that her grief and misery were painful to witness.'

Perceiving that he was gradually wavering, she urged,—

'You will *have* to go down to Monkswood, my dear Regy, if only for the sake of public opinion. Go as her guardian at any rate; putting your wife aside, it is your duty to go and see your ward. You will go, if only for a few days,' she entreated, anxiously.

'Yes, I will go,' he replied, slowly, and with an evident effort. 'I never looked at the subject from your point of view before. I see that it is necessary for me to study appearances; but I only go as her *guardian*, recollect. You are very eager in the

matter, Helen, and very pressing,' he added, with a smile, 'but Alice is by no means so anxious to see me as you imagine.'

'She is! she is!' cried Helen, in whose case the wish was father to the thought. 'And as for *you*,' laying her hand affectionately on his shoulder, 'you know you are very fond of her all the time, and that in your heart you are dying to see her; now, are you not?'

'What would be the good of telling you?' he replied, evasively. 'At any rate, Alice does not care two straws about me. I know her far better than you do, Helen, wise as you think yourself. I know her *private* opinion of me; but confidences between married people are sacred,' he added, with a bitter smile. 'I suppose she knows that I have come home?' he asked, abruptly, after a short silence.

'Oh yes; I wrote and told her of your safe arrival.'

'And what did she say?' he inquired, with unconcealed eagerness.

'Well, strange to say, Regy, she never answered my letter. But then, you know,' she added, with an awkward laugh, 'what a very bad correspondent she is.'

'A very bad correspondent, as you say,' he replied, with such emphasis that Helen looked at him amazed.

'Tell me, Regy, has she never written to you?' she inquired, with solemn eyes.

'Then to-morrow or next day I shall start for Monkswood,' he observed, coolly ignoring her question.

'Do, my dear boy,' returned Helen, with effusion; 'you don't know how glad I am to hear you say so. Mark and Geoffrey and I will follow you the end of the week and pay a visit to Alice, which your arrival has somewhat postponed.'

'Well, now I suppose I may go to bed?' said

Reginald, taking up his candle and looking at his cousin interrogatively. 'You have said your say, and carried your point, have you not? I am not at all sure that you are not sending me on a fool's errand, Helen.'

'I am very sure that I am *not*, Regy. You will be grateful to me some day, though now I daresay you think me a meddlesome, tiresome busybody. You look awfully tired and fagged, so I won't keep you up any longer. Good-night!' she concluded, holding up her cheek to be kissed.

As the door closed on him, a triumphant smile broke over her face. '*He* is all right at any rate. If Alice were as easily managed, or talked over, all would be as it ought to be in no time. I am only sorry I did not make this opportunity before,' said Mrs Mayhew aloud, as she turned to seek her well-earned repose, firmly persuaded that she had achieved a triumph of *finesse*.

Sir Reginald kept his promise, and went down to Monkswood 'solely in the character of Alice's guardian,' he kept telling himself. Perverse girl, *never* would he own her as his wife, until she had made complete submission, and yet in his heart of hearts how ardently he longed to see her! How he recurred again and again to what Miss Saville had told Helen! If they met alone, who could tell but that she would encircle his neck with her slim fair arms and whisper a petition for forgiveness, for pardon—if she only knew how readily, how eagerly he would grant it!

The nearest station to Monkswood was Manister, a cathedral and garrison town five miles off. Here he procured a fly, and with Cox and a portmanteau started without delay. Arrived at Monkswood, he told the driver to go round to the yard and get refreshments for man and beast, and desiring his servant to see that his old room was got ready, he sprang up the steps. The hall-door was wide open,

and he met Miss Saville sallying forth in a large garden-hat, her hands protected by chamois-leather gauntlets, and her dress tucked up in a business-like manner. She was exceedingly astonished, and beckoning her nephew-in-law into the library, overwhelmed him with questions. In reply to one of his, she said that Alice was still far from robust, or as gay and happy as she could wish to see her, but that she was wonderfully improved since Miss Ferrars had been with her. They were both in the grounds, drinking tea under the cedar; should she go and prepare them?

'No, certainly not; unless it would give Alice a shock. I suppose she knew that I was in England?'

'Yes, she heard of your arrival some days ago; but I think she scarcely expected to see you here,' replied Miss Saville.

'Did she not? And why not, may I ask?'

'Do not inquire from me, Reginald; you and Alice are the best judges of your own affairs. I have never interfered in any way, as you are aware. Alice is the proper person to answer your question. Naturally, she is deeply hurt; I can see that. You have never sent her one line since the birth of your son; but I am not in her confidence.' A footman, who had just entered, was quietly motioned away during this conversation, and went downstairs in great excitement.

'Well, I'm blessed, Mrs Morris, if there isn't a strange young man in the library, and the old lady a-holding forth to him like one o'clock, and he signs me out of the room as cool as you please!'

'What is he like?' inquired a chorus of maid-servants.

'Oh, he's a tall dark swell, that looks as if the whole place belonged to him.'

'And so it does,' said Cox, his man, coming in and banging down his dressing-case. 'If *he* is not master here, I'd like to know who is?'

'Lor', Mr Cox, what a start you have give us! And is it really Sir Reginald himself?' cried Mrs Morris, rising.

'You can use your eyes, Mrs Morris; there he goes down the steps.'

An immediate rush was made to the window to catch a glimpse.

Yes, sure enough there he was, walking towards the pleasure-ground with Miss Saville.

'Thank God, he looks well and strong!' said Mrs Morris with fervour, following his retreating figure with tears in her eyes.

'My! what a handsome gentleman!' exclaims an enthusiastic housemaid. 'If *he* does not suit her she *is* hard to please, isn't she, Polly?'

'Brown, please to remember yourself!' said Mrs Morris sharply. 'Not but that,' she added, relaxing, 'all the Fairfaxes are good-looking. Many a time I carried him in my arms, the same as I do Master Maurice. Ay, it seems but the other day.'

'I little thought you would ever see him again alive, ma'am; it was touch and go with him once, I can tell you,' observed Cox gravely.

'I must go now and see about dinner,' seizing her keys and bustling about; 'but you will tell me all about it when you dine with me by-and-by, Mr Cox,' said Mrs Morris, as followed by the footman and housemaid, she hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'MARY, IT IS MY HUSBAND!'

ALICE and Mary were to be found under the cedar, a very favourite resort of theirs those August evenings. A round wicker table stood between them,

upon which were all the requirements of afternoon tea. Alice, leaning back in a low garden-chair, was reading to Mary, who was knitting, 'A Princess of Thule.' How pretty she looked! The sun, glancing through the sombre branches, fell in stray flecks on her hair and dress—a white cambric trimmed with quantities of lace and knots of pale-blue ribbon. She was twirling a carnation in her fingers as she read. But there was a grave melancholy expression in her downcast face, sad to see in one so young. Coming to the end of a chapter, she paused, and exclaimed, looking up,—

'Well, I must confess, the Princess of Thule ran away from her husband on very small provocation. Don't you think so, Molly?'

Molly, instead of replying, said, as she gazed intently over Alice's head,—

'Why, who is this young man coming over here with Miss Saville?'

'Young man?' echoed Alice indifferently, and without turning her head; 'oh, it must be the postmaster. Auntie promised him a quantity of geranium and carnation cuttings.'

'Does the postmaster wear well-cut clothes and a dark moustache? Is the postmaster a gentleman?'

'No, you ridiculous girl,' turning and looking over her shoulder. After a minute's dead silence, 'Mary,' she gasped, 'it is my husband!'

Her face was deadly pale as she raised it to her friend's, and letting the book slip from her knees, she rose and leant against the tree with both her hands pressed to her heart. The cedar was between her and the house, and she had time to recover herself a little before her husband joined them. As he approached she looked at him keenly. Had he borne the traces of his recent wounds and fever, and looked a war-worn invalid, her woman's heart would have melted instantly, but as he came across the grass his step was as buoyant, his eyes as keen,

and his bearing as gallant as ever. A thousand thoughts seemed to crowd to her brain, her heart beat as though it would choke her; she was trembling from head to foot, as, with all the composure she could muster and without meeting his glance, she gave him her hand in silence.

Miss Saville promptly introduced Mary Ferrars.

'You and I ought to be friends, Miss Ferrars; I was your brother's fag at Eton, and many a thrashing he gave me. Don't you think that that constitutes a tie between us?'

He made the above speech in order to give Alice time to compose herself; and self-possessed as he seemed, his heart was bounding wildly too.

'I hope you are now quite strong, Alice,' he said, looking at her with evident concern, for her face was as pale as ashes.

'Quite, thank you,' was her laconic reply as she seated herself. Her knees were trembling so that she dared not, and could not, stand any longer.

'Give us some tea, my dear,' said Miss Saville, who fortunately appeared to grasp the situation, and tea was made; and as it was handed about a certain amount of conversation began to circulate. London, and Reginald's visit to the Mayhews, his passage home, the latest news from the East formed in turn topics of discourse. Alice scarcely opened her lips. Sir Reginald might have been a casual visitor, who had just dropped in, for all the warmth, sympathy, or interest displayed by his wife. A more uncomfortable quartette seldom took tea together. No one would suppose that the pale, haughty-looking girl, and the dark bronzed young man so leisurely sipping his tea, were husband and wife, and had only met within the last ten minutes after a separation of years. Mary Ferrars gazed from one to the other in silent amazement. Although outwardly calm, conflicting emotions were waging war in their bosoms.

She was thinking,—'If I don't manage to get away I shall disgrace myself—I shall burst out crying. This lump in my throat will choke me.' *He* was thinking,—'Helen was dreaming. This notion of hers was one of her most superb flights of imagination. I was a fool to listen to her. She was dreaming,' he repeated, as he looked at his wife; and certainly in that pale set face there was no sign of either welcome or repentance.

These thoughts were interrupted by their merry bold-faced boy, who, trotting past Sir Reginald, far ahead of his grave and stately nurse, rushed up to Alice, saying, 'I've come for cake.'

'Yes, yes, my darling!' replied his mother, stooping over his dark curls. 'Presently. Go over first and speak to that gentleman, and give him a kiss.'

'Who is he, mother?' he asked, turning round and gazing at Sir Reginald with the facsimile of his own eyes—in fact, the child's face was such a striking reproduction of his own that he himself could not help seeing the likeness. He was a splendid boy, of whom his father, were he a king, might well be proud.

Leaning his upright little person against Alice, and throwing back his head with a proud gesture very entertaining in one so young, he repeated, as he looked at Sir Reginald unflinchingly,—

'Who is he?'

'He is your father,' she faltered. 'Go and speak to him, Maurice.'

She could not refrain a glance of motherly pride as she pushed her boy with gentle force towards his other parent. But Maurice, who had inherited all his father's deliberation and decision of character, calmly remarked,—

'*He* is not my father. My father,' with much pride, and hands stuck in the belt of his blouse, 'is a soldier, and rides a horse with a long tail, and wears a sword and a red coat, and fights people.

You,' said he, nodding his head towards Sir Reginald, 'are just like anybody else.'

'Come here, sir,' said his father, stretching out an arm; and, much to everyone's amazement, the boy went quietly over and stood at his knee.

'I am a soldier; but I have got a holiday. You don't know what that is yet, do you? I have done with soldiers for awhile, and have put away my sword and my coat; but I'll show them to you some day, if you like.'

'Will you?' said the child, with awe-struck eyes; 'and will you lend me your sword to play with, for I'm going to be a soldier too some day?'

'Are you indeed? I'm afraid I can't lend you *my* sword; but perhaps I might buy you a little one instead. Suppose you come and sit on my knee and tell me all about yourself?'

So Master Maurice, nothing loth, climbed up; and Alice, with a beating heart, saw her child in her husband's arms for the first time. The two faces were so alike, and yet so different; she could now compare together, if she dared; but she shrank from meeting her husband's eyes.

Maurice was completely fascinated by the strange gentleman, and regarded him with mingled curiosity and delight.

'Are you my father?' he asked, incredulously.

'Yes.'

'And why did you not come to see me before?'

Here was an embarrassing question.

'Because I have been in India,' was the evasive reply.

'And are you come to stay at home now?' Momentary pause. Without waiting for a reply he pursued,—'I've seen your picture often. Alice keeps it in a locket; that one,' pointing a firm brown finger at his unfortunate mother, and raising a scorching blush to her hitherto pale face. 'She says I am to love you very much—as much as her.

Do you love her?' continued this pitiless innocent; 'do you love Alice?'

Reginald, painfully embarrassed, cast about for a reply. In desperation he answered,—

'Of whom are you speaking, Maurice? It is not possible that you call your mother Alice!'

'Yes, sometimes; and so do Aunt Mary and Miss Ferrars.'

'Well, you are not to do it any more, remember. Now tell me your name?' said his father, catechising in his turn.

'Maurice Reg—nald Fairfax.'

So he had not been wholly forgotten.

'And how old are you?'

'Past two, long time. How old are you?'

'Past twenty, this long time. Are you a good boy, do you think?'

'Alice knows,' he replied, nodding with easy confidence towards his mother.

'Yes, Alice knows,' said she, rising quickly and stretching out her hand; 'Alice knows that it's your bedtime, so say "Good-night," and come along.'

'No! no! no! not yet!' he cried, clinging tightly to Sir Reginald and burrowing under his arm.

'Maurice, listen to me,' said his father gravely, setting him down. 'You told me just now that you intended to be a soldier, did you not?'

'Yes,' returned Maurice eagerly.

'Well, you will never do for a soldier if you go on like this; his first duty is obedience. Now give me a kiss, and go with your mother at once.'

Maurice, whose *forte* was certainly not obedience, raised his eyes and looked at his father. Seeing that he was perfectly in earnest, he climbed once more on his knee, imprinted an experimental kiss on his moustache, and reluctantly departed with many regretful backward glances, Reginald watching the retreating pair till they were out of sight. Were they really his wife and son? He could

scarcely realise it; for, after all, he had had a very few months of married life and twenty-seven years of bachelor liberty. He felt much more like a bachelor than a Benedict.

Miss Saville, following his eyes, said,—'You may well look proud of him. Is he not a splendid boy? But he wants a father's hand over him sadly. Alice is his slave, and has been so ever since he was born. She gives up to him in every way, and he treats her more as his playfellow—as you may see—than his mother.'

Alice, having deposited Maurice in the nursery, ran quickly down to her own room, to be alone a little time to think and to compose herself.

She leant her hot forehead against the frame of the open window and gave way to a feeling of utter and undivided joy—joy that he was home, alive, and well, and under the very same roof as herself—at least within earshot. She paused as she heard Mary's gay musical laugh. They were all walking about the grounds; she could see them. He was standing on the gravel path, telling them something very amusing evidently, for as he concluded Miss Saville and Miss Ferrars both laughed immoderately. With this laugh came a revulsion of feeling. '*He* could joke; he could be exceedingly entertaining. This meeting was nothing to him. He had not shown the smallest signs of emotion or agitation. He had merely come to see if she was sufficiently meek and humble to be reinstated in his good graces. No, she was *not*,' she said to herself, as she thought over the utter neglect with which he had treated her for the last three years. 'He thinks he has only to extend the top of his sceptre and I shall be only too thankful to approach. But he is mistaken; I shall be "*Vashti*" to the end of the chapter. I shall never humble myself again. Pleased as he is with Maurice now, he has never taken any direct notice of him all these years.'

Alice dressed rapidly, hardening her heart with bitter recollections at every moment. Just as she had completed her toilette, and was arranging some flowers in her dress, the door opened and Mary hurried in.

'Oh, you sly girl!' she exclaimed; 'dressed already? I thought you were doing something of this kind to ensure a nice long *tête-à-tête* with *him*. Oh, Alice!' she cried, taking her in her arms and kissing her warmly, 'what a happy young woman you are! How very, very glad I am for your sake. Why did you never tell me your husband was so perfectly charming—so handsome, so distinguished-looking? How proud you must be of him, my dear!' holding Alice at arm's-length and looking at her with eager interrogation.

Alice, whose hair and costume were slightly disordered by her friend's enthusiastic hugging, drew back rather flushed and out of countenance.

'Mary,' she said, averting her face as she rearranged the roses in her dress, 'you are very good, and mean very kindly, but'—and she paused—'but I must tell you something I never meant to tell you. Reginald and I do not get on very well together. We—we—do not suit; but do not take any notice, *please*,' she entreated, as she looked at her friend appealingly. 'You will soon see'—and she stopped; then continued,—'Reginald is my guardian, you know; and he and I thought the best thing to do was to marry. But he is far more devoted to his profession than to me. His sword is his real wife, and I—I—get on very well alone, as you have seen, and will see.'

'What shall I see?' asked Mary. 'I see that you are the handsomest couple I have ever come across, and I have no doubt you are equally well matched in other respects.'

'Well, *qui vivra verra*,' replied Alice, as she opened the door and disappeared, anxious to avoid

her friend's inquiries. Reginald, having hurried his toilette, hastened down to the drawing-room in the hopes of seeing Alice for at least a few minutes alone. Her greeting had been cold and constrained; but she was taken by surprise. She was agitated, and his lovely shy Alice was the last to offer or accept caresses in public. It would be different when they met alone.

He stood for some time in the deep window, looking out into the park. How still and green and cool it all looked after the bustle and heat and glare in India! 'There was no place like home after all,' he thought, as his eyes roved over the undulating sward and the clumps of splendid timber, and he watched the rooks soaring nestwards and heard the corncrake's discordant yet familiar 'Craik-craik.' The door, which was ajar, was at this instant pushed open, and with a swish of long trailing skirts Alice advanced into the room. At first she seemed to hesitate, but on second thoughts approached the window.

'What a lovely evening it is, is it not?' she remarked, unfurling an enormous black fan with a grace all her own.

'Lovely indeed!' replied her husband, turning his back to the landscape and scanning her critically.

After a pause of thirty seconds (employed by his wife in steeling herself with recollections of the past), 'Alice,' he asked, with a gesture of appeal, 'have you *nothing* to say to me?'

'To say to you?' she repeated, with raised brows and an air of most perfect indifference. 'No, nothing particular; unless that I am afraid you had a very warm journey here to-day. Early in the afternoon it was absolutely broiling.'

'Well, yes, it *was* warm—a good deal warmer than the welcome you gave me. But you can make up for that *now*,' coming closer. 'Alice, are you not going to say you are glad to see me?'

'Yes, I am very glad to see you,' retreating two steps and making a shield of her fan.

'And is that all?'

'I think so—what more do you expect? You are nothing but my guardian,' she replied, avoiding his eyes.

'*Indeed!*' with an imperceptible start.

'Yes. You made the arrangement *yourself;* do not blame *me* for holding you to it,' she answered hurriedly.

'That arrangement, as you call it, was made under utterly different circumstances, when you did not, and would not, believe that I was your lawful husband. It is different now—you know better than that.'

'It may suit you to change *your mind*, but I do not alter mine. You are my guardian, and nothing more; as husband and wife we are strangers.'

'Is this your matured determination?' said Sir Reginald, in a transport of indignation.

'It is,' she replied firmly. 'You have forgotten the existence of your wife for the last three years: continue to forget her. Do you think I have no pride?'

'Pride—*no!*' he exclaimed, angrily. 'I could not dignify it by such a name. You are consumed by a senseless, besotted obstinacy, that no doubt you are pleased to consider as such.'

'You are, as usual, most flattering,' replied Alice, carelessly fanning herself, but inwardly considerably agitated.

'I will take you at your word,' said Sir Reginald, in a low but steady voice. 'I shall consider your decision *final*—as husband and wife we are strangers. But I had hoped—' and he paused.

'What did you hope?' she asked sharply.

'Never mind; it is of no consequence *now*,' preparing to withdraw from the window.

'Tell me,' she asked, detaining him with a move-

ment of her fan, 'did you ever get the photograph of Maurice that I sent you?'

'I did,' he replied, in an icy tone.

'You did!' she echoed. 'You really did!'

'I did, as I have before remarked, and what then?' looking at her sternly.

'Only that you must have also—' Here her answer was cut short by the entrance of Miss Saville and Mary; and Sir Reginald, walking to the other end of the room, remained aloof, looking out of the window till dinner was announced. During this short interval he had time to recover his composure and to collect his thoughts, and there was no trace of anger or agitation in his countenance as he took his seat at the foot of the dinner-table. No one could guess the enormous effort it had cost him to attain such self-command. How strange it looked to see Alice and her husband sitting opposite each other—host and hostess—master and mistress! A man's voice was an agreeable acquisition to the three trebles—not that one of them was much heard. Sir Reginald had that clear high-bred speech which is so expressively authoritative and yet so musical; he spoke like a man who meant what he said. As to Alice, indifferent and uninteresting as she looked, each syllable of those dear familiar tones thrilled her to the heart! Not once during dinner did he directly address her—he did not even look at her, so far as she knew.

'He is very, very angry with me,' she mused, as she made a feint of eating. 'But it was better to let him know at once that I am *not* "the patient Griselda!" When he cools down he will respect me all the more for respecting myself! No doubt I was too hasty, abrupt, and perhaps aggressive. I might have softened it more—but then I never can! I have no tact!' Absorbed in her own reflections, she never observed the signals Miss Saville was making to her; her eyes were steadily fixed

on her plate, and her thoughts apparently miles away.

'My dear, do you not think that we had better go into the drawing-room?'.

'I beg your pardon, auntie!' she exclaimed, with a start. 'Of course.'

Sir Reginald accompanied the ladies, and spent a considerable time in looking over photographs and talking to Miss Saville, Alice having betaken herself to a distant arm-chair and Mary to the piano. After she had played for some time, she went over to Alice, and in an audible whisper said, as she stooped to arrange a tumbled chair-back,—

'Come now, it is your turn; come and sing those two new songs you got last week.'

'No, not to-night, Molly,' she replied, shaking her head very decidedly. 'Do not ask me, I could not sing a note!'

In the same way, when Miss Saville challenged her to their usual game of backgammon, as at night the old lady's eyes were too weak for working or reading.

'Not to-night, please, auntie,' she said plaintively, 'I really feel too stupid.'

'If you will accept me instead, Miss Saville, I will play with pleasure; but I am afraid you will find me a most contemptible foe,' remarked Sir Reginald, as he arranged the board all wrong.

The old lady accepted his offer with the greatest alacrity, and they commenced to play without further delay.

Mary felt actually *ashamed* of Alice, who at some distance from her relatives, lay back in her chair composedly knitting, pausing now and then to count the stitches, and then resuming her occupation as if her bread depended on it.'

'Was this the way to welcome a husband? No wonder they did not "get on" if Alice conducted herself in this fashion.'

As to her husband, as far as Mary could judge, there was nothing outwardly amiss with his manners or appearance. She took the opportunity of studying him whilst he was busily puzzling his brains over the backgammon board.

About his good looks there could be but one opinion; but did not a certain curve of the nostrils speak of pride? Was not firmness almost too weak a word to convey the expression of his mouth and chin? Would not a man with less patrician beauty and a more yielding disposition be better calculated to make a woman happy?

As she thought all this with a contemplative gaze, she suddenly found a pair of dark eyes fixed on herself with evident interest and amusement.

'Am I so fortunate as to remind you of anyone, Miss Ferrars?'

'No,' she replied hastily. 'Please excuse my rudeness, I had no idea that I was staring so hard; but you must remember that you are actually the first Victoria Cross I have ever seen; and pardon me.'

'Surely you did not expect to see anything unusual in my appearance on that account?' he asked, with a smile. 'I daresay you have seen many as deserving of the distinction, if not more so. It is all a matter of luck.'

'Is that the way you speak of your honours?' said Mrs Saville, pouncing down remorselessly on a blot. 'I have no doubt you are very proud of the Cross all the same, and that you earned it *well*,' she added, with conviction.

A bald, desultory conversation was kept up and solely supported between Miss Saville and her nephew. Even Mary, from her opulent resources, could find but little to say, for Alice's demeanour paralysed all efforts at sociability. Alice, leaning back in her chair with an air of serene divine beatitude, enacted the part of a blanket of the heaviest and wettest description.

A very dreary evening at last came to an end; and, when the ladies had departed, Reginald strolled out into the pleasure-grounds to have a smoke and a think.

As he paced moodily up and down, his reflections were anything but agreeable—very much the reverse.

'What an infernal idiot I was to have come here! Fairfax, thy name is *fool*,' he added with bitter emphasis. 'Far from being inclined for *peace*, Alice does all she can to *pose* as the injured wife. There is nothing like taking high ground,' he muttered to himself, contemptuously kicking a fir-cone out of his way. 'When the Mayhews come I'll go, and meanwhile I'll meet Alice on her own terms. I shall take her at her word once for all. No more halting between two opinions; no womanish caprice; we shall be strangers. I am actually talking to myself!' he exclaimed, with a shrug of his shoulders; 'an infallible sign that my reason is beginning to totter. Well, if the worst comes to the worst, I sha'n't be the first Fairfax that has been an out-and-out *fool*.'

CHAPTER XIX.

ALICE'S OVERTURES ARE DECLINED.

BEING an early riser, Sir Reginald took a walk with his son and improved their acquaintance before breakfast the following morning. They found their way to the stables by mutual consent. Sir Reginald was astounded at their empty condition.

'Where are the carriage-horses?—where are the brown cobs?' he asked, authoritatively.

'Please, sir, Lady Fairfax sent them back to

Looton more than two years ago, as she never used them. She never drives,' said the groom gloomily.

'Then what are these two hunters doing here?'

'Her ladyship rides 'em reg'lar!'

'Rides them! Do you mean to say that she rides that chesnut, "Cardigan"—the most ungovernable brute I ever owned? There must have been some great mistake in their coming here at all. These are not the horses I ordered to be sent down.'

'I allus thought so, Sir Reginald; but her ladyship would not hear of any change, and I must say she do manage that mad cracked beast uncommon. But he is no ways fit for a lady, nor indeed for a gentleman.'

'Well, see that you never saddle him for her again. Those are my orders,' he said, turning away. 'She must have thought that I wanted to break her neck. Ignorance has certainly been bliss in my case. Many a wretched hour I would have spent had I known that Alice had adopted Cardigan as her park hack,' he muttered to himself, as he walked towards the house in answer to the gong which summoned them to breakfast.

The same afternoon the Mayhews and Geoffrey arrived. After five o'clock tea under the cedar, and a turn round the garden with Reginald, Helen was escorted to her room by her hostess.

'Shut the door and come here, Alice; I want to speak to you,' she said, imperatively.

Alice, knowing from the tone of her voice that a lecture was coming, took a seat in the deep window-sill, and, clasping her hands round her knees, looked up at her mentor with grave expectant eyes.

'There is *no* use in your looking at me with the air of a Christian martyr, you tiresome girl. What is this amazing piece of folly that I hear from Reginald?'

'I am sure I don't know,' replied Alice innocently.

'He tells me that you received him as an utter stranger!'

'Of course I did.'

'I assure you, Alice, most solemnly,' said her friend, brandishing her hairbrush to give emphasis to her words, 'that his patience is well-nigh exhausted, and you have bitterly, sorely disappointed him. Your power over him is rapidly waning, and no wonder. He told me in plain English that he would trouble himself no longer about you. He came home softened towards you by illness, time, and absence, and, little as you deserved it, laid his laurels at your feet. From all accounts you flung them in his face! What a foolish, reckless girl you are! Your happiness comes to you, and you spurn it. "Too late, too late!" will be the answer when you yourself go to seek it ere long.'

'But listen to me for one second, Helen,' interrupted Alice, vainly endeavouring to stem the torrent of her friend's eloquence. 'Hear me for an instant. I never expected him to come *here;* he took me utterly by surprise. Would you have had me volunteer an embrace—after our chilly parting, after three years' absolute silence? I *did* humble myself to the very dust before him, and all in vain.'

'When? How? You are talking nonsense!' exclaimed Helen excitedly—'nonsense, I fail to understand.'

'Promise me, my dear Helen, that you will *never* breathe it to mortal, not even to Mark,' she whispered.

'Yes, yes, I promise,' returned her cousin, with almost tragic solemnity.

'It was before Maurice was born. He never took any notice. I blush when I think of it,' she continued, burying her face in her hands. 'I sent him Maurice's photo too,' she murmured.

'Well!' with a gasp of amazement, 'I cannot understand it. But you must remember that you treated him horribly. Do not despair of his forgiveness yet. I am sure that in your heart you love him dearly. Make one effort to win him back for yourself. I know how hard it is to conquer one's pride, but surely the happiness of your whole life is worth a little humility, just as much as the throne of France was worth a mass.' Laying her hands on Alice's shoulders, and looking down at her gravely, she said, 'If Reginald leaves this to-morrow evening in his present state of mind, you will never see him again as long as you live! That is my firm belief.'

'Oh, Helen! do you really mean it?' she faltered.

'Yes, of course I do. He will go out into the world and mix in society, where he will be made much of; petted by women, for whom a hero *has* attractions. Basking in the world's smiles, rich, handsome, and successful, he will soon forget the proud, heartless, obstinate girl he once called wife. All sympathy will be for him. For you, living here in remote seclusion, eating you heart out with unavailing regrets, what will you do? You will not even have the comfort of your own compassion; all you can say will be, "It serves me right!" And as year by year snatches a portion of your youth and beauty from you, you will settle down into a miserable, dejected, hopeless woman.'

'My goodness, Helen, what a horoscope! what a picture!'

'Then, Alice, unless you would see it a reality, be up and doing; rouse yourself, endeavour to be the gay, lighthearted Alice of former days. Instead of cold looks and short answers, try once more smiles and jests, assume a virtue if you have it not; get out some of your former perfect wardrobe and make yourself as lovely as you can, and I promise you you will find yourself much happier ere long.

You *will* make an effort to make friends, will you not, my dear girl?' said Helen, smoothing Alice's shining hair and kissing her on the forehead. 'As a wife, it is your *duty* to be submissive.'

'It is a very painful, difficult duty,' said Alice, laying her face against Helen's arm.

'Do you wish to lose him altogether, Alice?' exclaimed Helen impatiently.

'No, no, I could not, I will not,' she whispered, without raising her head. During the last few moments Alice's love and pride had struggled in mortal conflict, and pride had been slain. After a silence of nearly five minutes, she raised her head and stood up, and turning her tear-stained, colourless face to her cousin, said,—

'What shall I do if Reginald repulses me, as he most probably will, since you say he is so angry?'

'Never mind; after all he is your husband, in spite of the folly you both talk about ward and guardian. He is as much your husband as Mark is mine, and you need not be bashful in making stray little advances to him. It is not as if you were a stranger.'

'It will be just as bad as if he were. I told him we were to be strangers for the future.'

'You told him *that!*' exclaimed Helen, with a gesture of incredulity. 'I never heard of such madness—never! Impress upon him without delay that you have exercised your sex's privilege and changed your mind. Run away now and get ready for dinner; the first bell was rung ten minutes ago. And let me see that you will be a good sensible girl for once, and, what is more important still, a good wife. Remember that we have always to give in.'

'If you only had any idea of the task you have set me, and how small and miserable I feel,' replied Alice, with her hand on the door-handle.

'Come, be off. Don't talk nonsense. You have no time to lose. Don't let me see that face at

dinner—you look as if Melancholy had marked you for her own. Away with you!' cried Mrs Mayhew, playfully pushing her out of the room.

Parker was amazed to hear her lady say,—

'Get me out my white silk and gauze dinner-dress, please, as quickly as possible, and run down to the pleasure-grounds, and bring me a bunch of crimson roses.'

Twenty minutes later Alice appeared in the drawing-room, where she was the cynosure of all eyes except her husband's; he merely swept her face with one cold glance, and resumed his conversation with Geoffrey.

She wore a long and exquisitely-made square-cut white silk, with a bunch of red roses in her bosom. A piece of black velvet was fastened at her throat by a diamond star, with solitaires in her ears to correspond. Dinner went off much more cheerfully than on the previous day. Alice and Geoffrey seemed to have forgotten their feud and fallen into their old ways; their gay repartees and small jokes provoked general amusement. Alice caught her husband's eyes fixed on her more than once in grave, puzzled amazement.

In the drawing-room, Alice went unasked to the piano and sang two songs, 'Rest on your battle-fields, ye brave,' and 'The Rhine Maiden.' She sang the former with such intense pathos and feeling that Mrs Mayhew and Mary were on the very verge of tears. Her pure, deliciously sympathetic voice called forth pleasure on every face except the one on which she wished to see it reflected.

Her husband continued his occupation of pulling Tory's ears as unconcernedly as if there was not a note of music within ten miles. After a time a round game was proposed.

'Come along, Alice,' said Geoffrey, 'and help me to count the markers,' emptying, as he spoke, a basketful of mother-o'-pearl fish on the crimson

cloth. As she stood beside the table in the full light of the lamp, busily reckoning dozens of counters, her husband realised how lovely she was —lovelier than ever, as Helen had said. What could surpass the exquisite symmetry of her slender figure, her delicately-chiselled profile, or the graceful poise of her haughty little head? What her face had lost in its perpetual ripple of smiles, it had more than gained in expression. She had grown, too, he discovered, at least an inch; her head was far above Geoffrey's shoulder. How young and girlish she looked, not more than nineteen at the outside! *Who* would believe that she was the mother of that great boy upstairs? It seemed absurd. How well he knew her half-foreign tricks and gesticulations with her pretty taper hands, as she indignantly accused Geoffrey of purloining a dozen counters more than his share. Would anyone think, as they looked at her standing there, that she was utterly without heart, as cold and callous as a block of marble, a miracle of obstinacy, and unreasonable beyond belief?

Presently she approached him, outwardly with graceful composure, inwardly with much trepidation, and said, without raising her eyes above his enamel solitaire shirt stud,—

'You will play, will you not, Reginald?'

'Thanks, no,' he replied, leaning still farther back in his chair, and languidly drawing Tory towards him by both ears.

'Oh, do,' she persisted, nervously twisting her bangles round and round her wrist; 'we are so few, and Geoffrey says you can teach us a new game.'

'No, thank you, Alice; I feel too stupid this evening.'

This speech was evidently said with intention; and a look that baffled and chilled her accompanied the shaft as it went home.

'Nonsense, my good fellow!' exclaimed Geoffrey,

from the card-table, 'of course you'll play. I never heard of such laziness. You will have to come to make up the number.'

Thus adjured, he was obliged to join the circle, where he ostentatiously selected the farthest seat from Alice. All the same, he sat opposite her, and was forced during the game to address her frequently; but his tone was coolly formal, and frozen indifference was in his glance. Nevertheless, it was as much as he could do to keep his head cool, with those lovely, wistful eyes opposite him. 'What, in Heaven's name, does she mean?' he muttered to himself over his cards, as more than once she made some remark and smiled at him across the table.

'*Souvent femme varie, fol qui se fie.* She has perhaps changed her mind in spite of her assurances to me yesterday. I shall not change *mine*, come what may.'

His answers to her questions were curtly polite, and he appeared totally absorbed in the game, and nothing but the game, and the enormous heap of counters that were piled before him.

'Just look at Reginald,' said Geoffrey, pointing enviously at his riches; 'did you ever see such luck? What's that saying about love and play? Something beginning, "*Malheureux en jeu—*"'

'Never mind French quotations,' interrupted Helen precipitately, and frowning and signing at Geoffrey, 'but pay me the six counters you owe me.'

'What are you nodding your head and frowning for?' inquired this exasperating youth. 'I've not said anything, have I?' looking round with an air of injured innocence.

'I'm bankrupt!' exclaimed Alice, suddenly folding her hands on the table and looking with a mock-melancholy face at Mark.

A reckless gambler, she had just seen her last

counter swept away, and was utterly penniless. Loans were freely offered by Helen and Geoffrey.

Helen was only too glad to divert the conversation; but much to their astonishment Alice declined their assistance, saying, as she held a pink palm across the table, 'Reginald is the richest of you all; he has made a fortune, and he is the proper person to pay my gambling debts.'

With a look of unqualified amazement he divided his heap of counters into two portions, and without a single remark pushed one of them towards Alice. In doing so she observed for the first time a deep scar across his wrist.

'What is that dreadful cut, Reginald?' she asked timidly.

'Nothing,' he replied shortly, pulling down his shirt-cuff and rapidly dealing out the cards.

'One of his many honourable scars,' explained Geoffrey. 'It's an uncommonly deep sabre cut he got that time he took the standard, and only—'

'Never mind standards and scratches, but go on with the game,' interrupted Reginald, with a tinge of asperity in his tone; 'it's you to lead, Geoffrey.'

'I say, Rex,' returned Geoffrey, as if struck by a happy thought as he leisurely sorted his hand, 'wouldn't it be fun if you were to give a lecture, a *public* lecture, on the Afghan war, say in the Assembly Room at Mainster? It would fill like mad, and you might send the proceeds—'

'To an asylum for idiots,' interrupted Sir Reginald impatiently. 'Will you play or not, Geoffrey?'

'I'll play, of course!' returned that youth tranquilly. 'But why should we not temper cards with conversation? Here'—nodding towards Alice—'I play the Queen of Hearts!'

. . . . . .

After breakfast the next morning, the ladies of the party sauntered about the garden and grounds.

An easy-chair, a cigar, and *The Times* supplied the Honourable Mark's requirements. Sir Reginald, declining Geoffrey's challenge to a game of tennis, repaired to the library to write letters.

Alice having done the honours of the garden and shown Helen the most reliable fruit trees, ran back to the house for a basket, in order to gather some plums for dessert. In returning she nearly came into collision with her husband at the garden-gate. Very much to her surprise he accosted her, saying,—

'Alice, the carriage-horses and cobs will be here this evening. I beg that you will not send them away again.'

'But they are of no use to me, really. Auntie has her ponies, and I never drive.'

'But for the use of your visitors, and returning calls, a carriage is indispensable.'

'I never have any visitors, nor have I any calls to return.'

'Pray, why not?'

'No one has called on me. Is not that an excellent excuse?'

'Am I to understand that you have no acquaintances?'

'With the exception of the clergyman's family and the Ruffords, who live at the other end of the county, and the Grantleys, who are abroad—I may say, none.'

'Is this by your own wish?'

'Well, no; not that I care two straws for society, but I will not conceal from you'—with a faint smile, and drawing a pattern on the gravel with her pretty little shoe—'that I am *not* a social success.'

'Do you mean me to understand that you are what is called "not visited"?'

'If you look at it in that light, I suppose I am *not*,' she replied, glancing towards the garden-gate, and moving a few steps in its direction.

composed. 'Of course I should be the *last* to hear.'

'It does not appear to concern you much,' he exclaimed angrily.

'No, not *much*,' she replied, looking at him with her clear, frank, truthful eyes.

'By Jove! then it concerns *me!* Society about here wants a lesson in good manners and hospitality if in nothing else. If I can find out the originator of this outrageous calumny it will be worse for him. I believe if he were here now, I would— But never mind, what is the good of blustering about it to you? I shall *act*, that is more to the purpose. How can you be thought a *divorcée* when you were never divorced? The story is senseless; you imagine it, perhaps.'

'It is not imagination that no one ever calls here, is it?' she asked dryly. 'I believe it is thought that you sent me to Monkswood to hush up scandal and to save the Fairfax name, and that I am really as bad as ever I can be.'

'As bad as ever you can be!' he repeated, with remarkable fluctuations of countenance, and half under his breath. 'As bad as ever you can be!' he repeated, his eyes alight with a sombre fire.

'I do not see that you need be so *very* angry, Reginald. Remember that as my *guardian*,' emphasising the word, 'it does not concern you so much.'

'It does concern me! Nothing could concern me more!' he answered vehemently.

'If I had known you would have been so fearfully angry, I never would have told you. How unreasonable and inconsistent you are! You insisted on an answer; you made me speak by main force'—holding up her slender wrist, which still retained the red mark of his fingers,—'and when your wish is gratified you are furious. You are encroaching on the privileges of my sex; now, are you not?' she asked, with a smile.

'Did *I* do that, Alice?' he exclaimed, aghast, pointing to her wrist. 'I most sincerely beg your pardon. I was so determined to hear the truth, that I forgot it was not a man's arm I was grasping. I have been downright brutal, but the idea of anyone casting a slur on *you*, of all people, drives me beside myself. I am afraid I have been very rude and violent altogether; but you are acquainted with my temper of old—and time, as you may observe, has not improved it,' he concluded with a short laugh.

'May I look at your wrist?' he asked, with real concern depicted in his face.

'You may,' she replied, frankly placing her thin little hand in his.

'I hope you will forgive me, Alice. I must have hurt you,' he added, after a pause, dropping her hand with a respectful distant gesture, as if he had suddenly recollected himself.

'You did hurt me. You have no idea how strong you are; your hand feels as if it were made of steel. "I'll forgive you *this* time," as Madame Daverne used to say, "but don't let it occur again,"' she added, with an assumed gaiety she was far from feeling.

After a silence of some minutes, he said,—

'I can promise you one thing, Alice, and that is, that you shall resume your proper position in society, and be treated with the respect to which you have every claim. Your good name and mine are one. We will not talk any more on the subject, and I need not detain you longer,' opening the garden-gate politely and standing aside to allow her to pass. But Alice was apparently in no hurry; she continued pulling the syringa mechanically.

'I want you to promise me something else, Reginald. Will you be friends with me?' she asked, raising her sweet wet eyes to his.

'Friends!' he echoed, fairly staggered by the

question. 'Friends!' he reiterated, in a slow, deliberate tone; 'of course. As your guardian, I must be your friend; and I am,' he replied stiffly.

'That is not the sort of friend I mean. A guardian seems to me to be a sort of stern, surly old gentleman, who doles out money, and orders one about, and keeps one in order, and is altogether horribly disagreeable.'

'Charming picture! May I ask if I am the original?' he inquired.

'No, of course not; you may be stern and disagreeable, but you are not old and surly.'

'You are really *too* flattering!'

'If you knew how few friends I have, how alone in the world I feel, you would not say *no*,' she urged.

'Did I say no?' he inquired, with raised brows.

'You certainly have not met my advances halfway,' she replied, with a forced laugh. 'You *will* be my friend, will you not, Regy?' she pleaded, laying her hand timidly on his coat-sleeve.

'I thought we were to be strangers?' h returned, coolly and politely removing her fingers

With a gesture of impatience Alice turned away, struggling hard to repress her tears, and with a fair assumption of dignity endeavoured to open the gate which a moment before had closed itself with a bang. She could hardly see as she bungled at the bolt.

'Allow me!' said her husband, starting forward to her assistance. To her unutterable dismay and disgust, one of her too ready tears fell with a splash on his slim brown hand. It had the effect of melting him at once. He gazed at Alice steadfastly, and with a softer look in his dark eyes than they had known for many a day.

'You foolish girl! if you really think my friendship worth having—do you not know very well that it is yours, and that, in spite of everything, I

am always your best friend? How can I be otherwise? Much and often as I have wished it, I am not one of those who can forget.'

'Nor are you one of those who can forgive!'

'How can you tell?'

'How can you ask me such a question?'

'Well, we won't argue about it. You say you want a friend?'

'I often want a friend to advise me—someone older, wiser, and better than I am.'

'I can hardly flatter myself that you allude to me,' he said, surveying his wife with the gravest astonishment.

'Yes, of course I do.'

'To obtain your good opinion has always been my ambition; but I had no idea that I held such a high place in your esteem. You have quite taken my breath away.'

'I wish you would not talk in this horribly satirical manner; it is not at all nice of you, Reginald—not a bit like what you used to be! What has changed you?'

'I am not the least like what I used to be; in many respects I was a fool,' he replied, with perfect equanimity.

'Were you really?' she said, stopping and looking at him with wide-open eyes. 'What makes you say so? You are joking.'

'All right! let us imagine that I am joking. You say you want a friend ready with counsel and advice. What more can you desire than Helen?' waving his hand towards the garden. 'If you are fond of taking advice—of which "I hae me doots," as the Scotchman said—there is no one who loves imparting it better. It will be a mutual satisfaction for both parties.'

'Now, you are down on Helen's little weakness; that's rather a shame, you know. Of course I have Helen for a friend and adviser, but—'

'Excuse me for interrupting you, but may I light a cigar? It has the same effect on me that music is popularly supposed to have on the savage.—Go on, Alice,' he said, when he had lit up to his satisfaction; 'you were telling me something very interesting just now about a friend. Why will not Helen meet all the requirements of the case?' he asked, with a mocking expression in his eyes.

'Do be serious.'

'Very well, I will,' he answered, with sudden gravity. 'You say you want an intimate, confidential, particular friend, and have done me the honour to offer me the post.'

She nodded.

'I beg to decline it in the most unqualified manner. I am your friend in the best sense of the word—I would cut off my right arm to serve you—but a friend at a distance, one that you will seldom hear of, much less see. The friendship of which you have visions is out of the question between us, and only possible between husband and wife. Be satisfied with your own arrangements; we are ward and guardian, nothing more. Do not be vexed with me for speaking plainly; you asked me to be serious, and I am serious. It seems to me that you do not know your own mind two consecutive hours, but I am not so changeable. You had everything in your hands the other day; it was a question of now or never. Two words would have bridged the gulf between us; you did not speak those two words, and now the occasion for them will never occur again—you let slip your last opportunity.'

'I do not in the least understand you,' she faltered.

'If you reflect for a moment, I think you will remember the two words—the key to the riddle. Here comes Geoffrey,' he observed, as Geoffrey, in

a cool grey suit, with a flower in his button-hole, came bounding towards them.

'Well, upon my word,' he exclaimed, 'I've been watching you two for the last twenty minutes, talking away nineteen to the dozen, and had I not previously known I should have declared it one of the most promising flirtations I ever interrupted.'

'You are always thinking of flirtations,' said Alice, hastily turning away. 'Come along, and help me to gather some plums; Helen is waiting for the basket.'

CHAPTER XX.

'SIR REGINALD'S EYES ARE OPENED.'

'ALICE, I have such a crow to pick with you!' exclaimed Mrs Mayhew, bursting into her room the same afternoon, as she was dressing for lawn-tennis.

'With me?' pausing with one arm in the sleeve of her dress. 'Pick away, I daresay I shall find a bag to put the feathers in.'

'It is no joking matter, I assure you,' said Helen, leaning one hand on the dressing-table, and nodding her head with much solemnity. 'Reginald has been so angry with me, I declare I feel just as I used to do after I had had a lecture from papa. I never saw him in such a rage in my life, and all about you,' she concluded indignantly.

'*Cela va sans dire*,' replied Alice, coolly selecting a handkerchief from her sachet.

'What is this monstrous tale you have been telling him about not being visited, and being tabooed as a *divorcée*? I never heard of anything so absurd. I told him that it was entirely a de-

lusion; that living so much alone had made you fancy and imagine things; and that I was certain it was all a mistake—mere imagination.'

'You should not have said that, Helen,' replied Alice gravely. 'Is it imagination that, although I have lived here for three years, not one in the neighbourhood has crossed the threshold with the exception of the rector and the Ruffords? Am I taxing my imagination very heavily when I say that I am never asked to join in any of the local charities, bazaars, or concerts, although belonging to one of the oldest families in the county, and known to be abundantly blessed with riches? Am I drawing on my imagination when I tell you that the looks which I meet are too disdainful to describe?—that were I that dreadful woman I heard you telling auntie about, who had run away from her husband and children—gone off with an actor, I think, you said—they could not hold me in greater scorn and contempt?'

'And why has this never come to my ears? Why have you kept it from me all along? Reginald has been telling me that he left you under my charge and Mark's, and a pretty way I have fulfilled my trust, he says, when he comes home, only to find you outlawed from society. Why was I not told? Was this fair to me, Alice?' said Mrs Mayhew, sinking into a seat with an air of being entirely overwhelmed.

'We kept it from you on purpose, auntie and I; we thought there was no use in worrying you and Mark, and all you could have said or done would not have been of the slightest use. All the waters in the sea would not have washed me white in the estimation of my charitable neighbours. When first I came here I was too miserable to notice anything; then for a long time I was very ill, as you know. It was fully a year before I became really alive to my position, as you would call it.

Then auntie spoke to the rector, and he told her the truth—that it was said that Reginald had separated from me for very good reasons; and he asked her point-blank if we were on friendly terms. What could she say?'—with a gesture of appeal—'she told him the truth—that we were *not*, but that our difference was entirely a matter between ourselves, and did not concern the world at large. But, unfortunately for us, the world at large is deeply interested in our affairs. The rector believed auntie, I am sure, but no one else will listen to such an explanation for one second; and as it transpired through the servants and the post-office that I never received any Indian letters, but lots of English ones in a man's hand—Geoffrey's—my fate was sealed. I am considered a dreadful young person. Tell me, Helen,' putting on a most bewitching little hat, and looking at her mischievously with her head on one side, 'do I *look* very improper?'

'Alice, how can you go on like this?' exclaimed her cousin hysterically. 'How can you jest on such a subject? What an odd, extraordinary girl you are; at one moment in the wildest spirits, at another in the depths of woe.'

'You cannot accuse me of very wild spirits lately, at any rate, and you must not forget that I have Irish blood in my veins, and excuse my vagaries on that score. I can tell you that I surprise *myself* very much at times.'

'Alice! Alice!' shouted Geoffrey from downstairs.

'There, I must be off. Do not look so dismal, my dear, horrified Helen. Now that Reginald has come here, people will think better of me, you will see. Come along,' she continued, taking her arm and hurrying her down the corridor, and flying with her downstairs at a breakneck pace, 'they are all waiting for us on the tennis-ground; even Mark is going to play.'

'If you had not been so perverse, shutting yourself up, refusing to come to us in London, and living the life of a nun, these dreadful ideas would never have occurred to people,' panted Mrs Mayhew breathlessly. 'It was your own fault entirely, your *own* fault,' she concluded emphatically, as they came within earshot of Geoffrey, who was waiting for them at the edge of the lawn.

The Monkswood people played tennis all the afternoon with great zeal and spirit: Alice and Mary, Reginald and Geoffrey, all clad in orthodox white flannel apparel, had had some capital games; Mr and Mrs Mayhew, less young and active, having settled down after the first half-hour into the *rôle* of spectators, under the shade of a wide-spreading horse-chestnut, where claret-cup and tea awaited the thirsty. At length, breathless and hot, Reginald and Geoffrey, who had been playing a match, came over, and throwing themselves at full length on the grass, said, 'For goodness' sake, give us something to drink! Send round the claret-cup!'

'So you were beaten, Geoffrey? *Poor* Geoffrey,' observed Alice compassionately, as she handed him a bumper of claret and soda-water.

'I haven't half a fair chance with him,' he replied, with a deprecating nod towards his victor; 'he has a tremendous pull over me—he is such an A1 racket-player; spent hours in the racket-court every day in India.'

'No, no, merely to keep myself from going to sleep of an afternoon. I'm only a very moderate player, indeed,' expostulated Reginald modestly.

'Perhaps you will say that you are a very moderate cricketer too?' said Geoffrey, with an air of calm, judicial severity.

'Nothing to boast about, certainly.'

'Well, I'll do the boasting for you; and that reminds me that I met the curate in the village this morning.'

'No very novel or startling sight. *Après?*'

'He is coming up here this afternoon to ask you to play in the local cricket-match on Monday, also to wait on you and pay you the visit of ceremony.'

Reginald, who had been reposing at full length, gazing up speculatively among the wide, broad-leaved branches, now turned suddenly on his elbow and brought himself *vis-à-vis* to Geoffrey, with a stare of profound incredulity in his handsome dark eyes.

'The Phœnix Club against the world! The curate is a cricket-maniac of the first water. He has let me in for it—I'm a Phœnix,' concluded Geoffrey, in an aggrieved tone. 'I only trust we shall have an appreciative audience next Monday.'

'I hope you impressed upon the curate that there was not the smallest probability of my taking part in the match,' said Reginald imperiously.

'*Au contraire;* on the principle of the fox who has lost his tail, I informed him that you were well known at Lord's and elsewhere as one of the best bowlers in the Service, and that he had only to enlist you among the Eleven to ensure a signal victory: consequently he will take *no* refusal.'

'But I do not intend to play,' remarked Reginald firmly. 'You forget that I have a stiff arm. My cricketing days are over; for the future, so far as the noble game is concerned, I intend to live on my reputation.'

'Your arm is as well as ever,' returned Geoffrey with calm conviction; 'I would be very sorry to stand a buffet from it. *That* excuse sha'n't serve you—and, by the same token, here's the holy man coming up the avenue in a carriage and pair.'

'Nonsense, Geoffrey!' exclaimed Mrs Mayhew, looking over her shoulder. 'Alice'—in a tragic tone, and with a significant glance—'here are visitors.'

'So I see,' replied Alice, with wonderful nonchalance. 'I suppose I must go in, though, literally speaking, I am *out*. Who will go with me?' looking round. 'Don't all speak at once.'

'Not I, for one,' returned Mary promptly; 'if I accompanied you with this red face'—fanning herself with a small branch of horse-chestnut leaves—'the people would think you had been beating me. Besides, I see too much of that old lady in her yellow bonnet as it is; she sits just in front of us in church. I believe she is the greatest gossip in the county, so be sure you don't commit yourself beyond the weather, and the beauty and amiability of a certain Miss Ferrars who is staying with you.'

'I'll go with you, my pretty Alice,' said Geoffrey, still, however, retaining his recumbent position, and making believe to play the guitar upon his tennis-bat, and fingering away with great fluency and skill.

'"Nobody asked you, sir, she said,"' quoted Alice, standing up and shaking some crumbs from her lap: 'Your manners are not sufficiently formed—you don't know the meaning of the word "decorum," and you always try to make me laugh or inveigle me into some horrid blunder, and then you are delighted and sit grinning like a Cheshire cat. No, *you* won't do.'

'Thanks, fair cousin, thanks,' raising himself to a kneeling posture, and making a profound full-length salaam on the short green sward.

'I see I must go alone,' exclaimed Alice, glancing hopelessly at her husband, who was lying on the grass, smoking, his arms folded behind his head, his hat over his eyes, the very embodiment of luxurious lazy indifference.

'Don't drink *all* the tea, good people,' was her parting injunction as she hurried off across the

lawn, the whole party following with admiring eyes her well-poised figure and graceful gait.

'I must go in too,' said Helen, with visible reluctance, when she had conscientiously drained her second cup of tea. 'I promised to drive down to the village with Miss Saville. She thinks one of the schoolmaster's daughters would be an ideal maid for Hilda. Heigho! I suppose I must leave you,' rising heavily.

'It is to be hoped that this "ideal maid" will turn out to be something more beautiful than your present treasure, Helen,' remarked Geoffrey impressively. 'To say that she is plain about the head but feebly expresses it; if you were to set her up in a field, not a crow would come near it. Shall I come with you'—half rising—'and give you the benefit of my critical and artistic eye? I'm not half a bad judge,' he added complacently.

'How can you be so detestably vulgar! Fancy, discussing the appearance of people's servants,' said Helen, with the air of lofty, righteous indignation.

'And why not?' pursued Geoffrey serenely.

'Why not?' echoed Mrs Mayhew. 'Well, for one thing— However, I'm not going to bandy words with you now—here are all these people coming from the house, and I must flee,' she added hastily, as she turned and hurried off among the trees, in the hopes of making her escape unseen.

She was quite correct—Alice was actually sallying forth, escorting two elderly ladies and a vapid-looking youth, with hay-coloured hair and an incipient ditto moustache. He wore an extraordinarily high collar, an eyeglass, and pale lavender gloves, and it was easy to see that he considered James Blundell, Esq., the very glass of fashion and the mould of form. He was sucking the knob of his cane with greedy relish, and casting every now and then glances of marked approbation on his

pretty young hostess, as he stalked along beside her.

'What in the world possessed Alice to bring them out here?' growled Mr Mayhew irritably, as he looked over his shoulder and beheld the advancing squadron.

'To allow us to share the pleasure of entertaining them, of course,' responded Miss Ferrars, in her most affable manner.

'Does the old lady with the parrot beak call that thing on her head a bonnet, or a bewitched bird's-nest?' whispered Geoffrey, as she slowly and majestically approached the group under the trees—in fact, her mode of progression gave one the idea that she was on castors, and being pushed along over the turf like a heavy piece of furniture.

Alice introduced Mrs Pritchard and Mrs Blundell to Miss Ferrars.

'My cousins, Mr Mayhew and Mr Saville,' she said, indicating the two reclining gentlemen, who sprang up, bowed themselves, and again subsided. Mrs Blundell and Mrs Pritchard having executed leisurely and patronising bows all round, sank into two roomy garden-chairs, and permitted themselves to be refreshed with cups of tea.

Sir Reginald, who had been collecting stray bats and balls, now joined the group, and doffing his hat politely to the new arrivals, made some trivial remark with respect to that fail-me-never topic, the weather. He seemed to take it for granted that they would recognise him as their host, and dispensed tea, claret-cup, and strawberries to the best of his ability.

Geoffrey still remained prone on the grass, making no attempt to share his labours, and apparently spell-bound by Mrs Blundell's appearance.

But Reginald's efforts at hospitality were not favourably received by the two lady guests: their

gaze was that of stony interrogation, their answers brevity itself.

'*Who*,' they asked themselves, 'was this handsome young fellow in the cricketing flannels and straw hat with a zingari ribbon, so suspiciously at his ease—so entirely at home? Had their ears deceived them, or had he called Lady Fairfax by her Christian name?'

'No sugar, Alice—no sugar,' in an easy, authoritative tone, that spoke whole volumes of the closest intimacy.

No tea for young Mr Blundell—no, no, his most ardent desire was to have a game of tennis with Lady Fairfax—a desire by no means warmly reciprocated. Nevertheless, she good-naturedly left the cool shade once more in order to gratify his wishes.

Meanwhile the two ladies engaged the rest of the party in desultory languid conversation.

Mrs Blundell was a very stout, pompous old woman, whose skin, somehow, had the appearance of being too tight for her face. A pair of rolling little pig's eyes took in every object with microscopic detail; in fact, they had a double duty to perform, as their owner was exceedingly deaf, and in every case brought the eye to the rescue of the ear. She not only had to be roared at, but roared herself in reply; and what she flattered herself was an inaudible whisper, was generally as loud as ordinary conversation, and as she indulged her friend and toady, Mrs Pritchard, with many of these supposed *sotto voce* remarks, the result can be better imagined than described. A most gorgeous yellow bonnet adorned Mrs Blundell's hoary head. To an inexperienced eye it appeared a mad rendezvous of flowers, beads, and feathers. A very voluminous satin mantle enshrouded her matronly form—a mantle that would have been a mine of wealth to an Indian squaw, being a prey to the

all-pervading bead, and one mass of steel fringes, tassels, and trimmings. So much for her outward woman.'

Mrs Blundell had a threefold object in visiting Monkswood; she came, firstly, to gratify her son, who had been immensely smitten with Lady Fairfax's appearance, and who yearned to make her personal acquaintance; secondly, she came to indulge herself in the proud consciousness that she, Mrs Blundell, a mere nobody—retired soap, in fact—had it in her power to countenance and patronise the wife of one of the most blue-blooded magnates in Steepshire, to take her under her protecting wing, give her some sage matronly advice, and perchance lead the wicked little stray lamb back into the fold of society; and thirdly, she came to satisfy the cravings of a sound, wholesome curiosity, to see for herself if all tales were true, to look with her own keen little eyes within the massive, rarely-opened, grand entrance-gates of Monkswood.

Now all speculation was completely set at rest; seeing was believing, and she beheld plain unvarnished facts. Never would she tolerate, patronise, or countenance her present hostess, never again darken her doors. Meanwhile, as she *was* here, she would make the most of her time, the best of her opportunities—were some of her charitable reflections. It was not every day that the very fount of scandal itself was laid open to her judicial eye. Here was no second-hand sight, but a most piquant improper little drama being played before her very face. In other words, she saw Lady Fairfax, indisputably gay and pretty and well dressed, entertaining, in her husband's absence, three men, all drinking tea or claret-cup, eating strawberries, and lolling on the grass, with the air of being most thoroughly at home; and there was an easy familiarity in their bearing towards each other, and

specially towards their hostess, that was absolutely revolting to Mrs Blundell's sense of propriety—the fair young man had actually rapped her over the knuckles with the sugar-tongs! Where was the old chaperon?—a myth or a dummy most probably; no creature of the female sex was visible, excepting that bold-looking red-haired young woman, who had been riding about the roads with Lady Fairfax the whole summer. These thoughts flashed like lightning through the good lady's mind as her eyes looked from one to the other, storing up her memory with a distinct mental photograph of the whole scene.

Mrs Pritchard, Mr Blundell, and Miss Ferrars occupied wicker garden-chairs; the three gentlemen reposed in the foreground on the grass, but a sense of politeness had raised them to a sitting position. The weather, and tennis, as a popular and healthy game, had been alike exhausted, and conversation flagged visibly, in spite of Mary's gallant exertions.

'Why were you not at the grand cricket-match in Manister yesterday?' asked Mrs Blundell, in a loud and authoritative tone.

'I don't know, I'm sure; we never thought of it,' replied Miss Ferrars meekly.

'If you had, it would not have done you much good,' put in Geoffrey; 'there are no carriage-horses. I never knew such a little duffer as Alice—sending them back to Looton,' he added, in a low aside.

'No carriage-horses!' echoed Mrs Blundell, whose ears had at least caught *that* sentence. 'Dear me! you don't say so?' in a tone of deep commiseration. Then turning aside to her friend she whispered (?): 'I heard he kept her tight, but I had no idea it was as bad as that.'

Mary, Geoffrey, and Mr Mayhew exchanged looks of unqualified amazement, and again an awkward silence ensued.

Mrs Blundell once more proceeded in a louder and more *forte* key,—

'I am surprised to see Lady Fairfax entertaining visitors; I had no idea she ever had people staying here.'

'We are the exception that proves the rule,' replied Geoffrey at the top of his naturally robust organ.

'Are *you* staying in the house—you two young men?' indicating Geoffrey and Reginald with a fat forefinger.

'Yes,' returned Geoffrey, who had taken upon himself the task of answering.

'Ah! I do not think I know your face,' to Geoffrey. 'Are you in the Manister Bank?' patronisingly.

'No, I'm not;' rather sharply.

'Do you belong to this part of the country?'

'I have not that honour.'

Mrs Blundell gazed at him dreamily for nearly sixty seconds, and then a light seemed to break, for she exclaimed with the triumph of one who has grasped and presents an indisputable fact,—

'I have it! You are the new young man in the Brewery.'

'I am *not*,' returned Geoffrey haughtily, and shouting with impressive distinctness. 'I am not in the Brewery; and to save you the trouble of further speculation on my behalf, I may as well inform you that I'm in the cavalry.'

'Ah!' There was a world of meaning in that interjection—a meaning no pen could convey. 'And he?' indicating Reginald with her sunshade.

'Cavalry officer also.'

'Two cavalry officers,' she repeated slowly, evidently rehearsing the intelligence for future occasions. If she had said, 'Two returned convicts,' her intonation could not have expressed deeper disapproval.

Whilst she was gratifying her thirst for informa-

tion, her friend and Mrs Mayhew were exchanging platitudes about flowers and fruit, the seasons of the year, and such like enthralling topics. They now made a combined effort to include her in their conversation. But it was of no avail; she evidently preferred to draw out Geoffrey, who seemed not merely willing, but delighted to oblige her.

Having replenished her cup with politest alacrity, he resumed his seat in front of her *à la Turque*, and looked up at her with an amused twinkle in his mischievous little hazel eyes.

'Lady Fairfax is a very pretty young woman,' she remarked to him over her teacup. A nod satisfied her of Geoffrey's cordial assent. 'My son admires her immensely, so do all the gentlemen about here. She is rather what I call a gentleman's beauty,' she added, in a deprecating tone; 'but still *I* think her decidedly good-looking,' with an air that signified that Alice had now, and once for all, received an invaluable *cachet* of distinction.

'Very kind of you, I'm sure,' muttered Geoffrey.

'Frederick has been most anxious for me to call ever since he met Lady Fairfax one day out riding; he has been dying to make her acquaintance. He has such an eye for beauty.'

'He looks like it,' assented Geoffrey in a cheerful shout.

'Be quiet, Geoffrey,' muttered Reginald from behind.

'Are you any relation to Lady Fairfax, may I ask?'

'Yes, of course I am,' roared Geoffrey.

'Both of you? Cousins, did you say?'

'No, I did not; but I *am* her cousin.'

'As much her cousin as I am,' in a loud aside to her friend, and with a significance baffling all description.

Mary, seeing a storm brewing in Reginald's eyes, hastened to throw herself into the breach with an

all-absorbing bazaar for bait. But no, the devoted old lady madly rushed on her fate. After a few brief replies she resumed,—

'Did you say that this other gentleman was a cousin also?' regarding Geoffrey with a keen satirical eye.

'The interest you take in Lady Fairfax is most gratifying to the whole family. No, he is *not* her cousin, he is her husband.'

'Not her cousin, not her husband! You need not tell me *that;* of course I know *that*,' with insolent emphasis.

What was to be done with this terrible old woman, on whom her friend's signs and nudges were entirely thrown away?'

At this instant, the game over, Alice, flushed and breathless, joined the group.

'I won, Geof; only—fancy—that,' she said, laying her hands on his shoulders in the excitement of her recent victory.

'Then, I suppose, there will be no living in the same house with you for the next week,' remarked her cousin, moving so as to make room for her beside him on the grass.

She looked utterly fagged and exhausted; her frail, delicate appearance struck her husband forcibly, and for the first time he sprang up, dragged forward a garden chair, and, taking her by the arm, pushed her into it with an air of lover-like solicitude—by no means lost on Mrs Blundell—that had been foreign to his manner for many a long day.

'Thank you, Reginald,' said Alice, sinking back into the seat with a sigh of relief and removing her hat. 'To reward you for your politeness you shall have a little bit of my dress to sit on,' spreading out the folds of her skirt.

'This is really too barefaced,' cried Mrs Blundell in one of her very loudest asides.

'Then, getting up and extending her hand very

stiffly to Alice, she said in a most pointed, unmistakable manner,—

'It is quite time for *me* to be going, Lady Fairfax. I wish you good-afternoon. Come, Frederick,' she called to her son, who was quaffing quantities of claret-cup, 'I am ready,' and with a comprehensive bow she was sailing off, but was arrested by Sir Reginald, who, leaping to his feet, confronted her.

'Before you leave, madam, will you have the goodness to tell me *who* you think I am?'

With a most evil and significant smile she was turning away, and metaphorically proceeding to shake the dust off her feet, when he again detained her.

'I am Lady Fairfax's *husband!*' he shouted. 'What do you mean by your looks and innuendoes?'

'What is he saying, Frederick? I can't hear a word.'

Reginald turning to her son, with eyes ablaze and perfectly livid with passion, said to the electrified youth,—'Be good enough to make your mother understand *who* I am; also make her clearly comprehend that neither Lady Fairfax nor myself have any further desire for her acquaintance. As for *you*'—with withering contempt,—'I sincerely hope your curiosity has been gratified with regard to my wife's appearance. That there may be no delay in your departure'—looking at the three culprits sternly—'I shall myself go and order your carriage.'

So saying, he took off his hat and walked away, leaving his visitors covered with amazement and confusion, Geoffrey in agonies of repressed laughter, and Miss Ferrars and Mrs Mayhew in a state of mental coma.

When this tirade had been interpreted to Mrs Blundell—she had heard a good deal more than she pretended—she returned across the grass, from

where she was awaiting her carriage, and humbly accosting Alice, overwhelmed her with excuses and apologies which there was no avoiding. The worldly-wise old lady said to herself,—'It will never do to quarrel with the Fairfaxes—people of great wealth and influence, if all is as it seems.' Supposing her outrageous mistake was to get about, what capital for her fellow-gossips! At all costs she would leave on friendly terms, and be literally stone-deaf to every snub. Summoning a sweet smile to her discomfited countenance, she implored Alice to intercede with her husband:—'He looks as if he could refuse you *nothing*. Do make my peace with him; do go and bring him to receive my most humble apologies. You must blame my unfortunate deafness, not me. I am not, like other people, my dear young lady; I am afflicted, and I frequently get hold of wrong impressions, which is my great misfortune—not, I am sure you will allow, my fault. I did hear a little idle whisper that you were rather—a—rather—a—' casting wildly about for a delicate way of expressing herself, and becoming crimson in the attempt—'shall we say—fast young lady?'

'Certainly, if you like, and as long as I need not agree to the fact,' returned Alice with much composure.

'Well, and finding you entertaining *three* cavalry officers, all on a most familiar footing, and imagining that your husband was still absent, I just thought, as a much older married woman'—effusively—'I would give you a little hint by my manner.'

'In that she succeeded to a marvel,' murmured Geoffrey.

'And I had no idea, no more than the man in the moon, of the real state of the case; nor that that dark distinguished-looking young man was Sir Reginald himself. And has he come to stay? and where has he been all this time?' she asked with

affectionate solicitude. 'However, I'll question you another time. Do run after him and obtain my forgiveness; I assure you I cannot leave the place without it,' planting her parasol in a typical manner in the sod and waving Alice to the quest.

Alice most unwillingly set out to find her husband; he was in the yard composing himself with a cigar, and personally despatching the carriage. When he had heard what she had to say he burst forth,—

'Alice, I am astonished that you can ask such a thing. No, I certainly will not forgive them; and if you say another word on the subject, I warn you that I shall begin to swear. I feel literally boiling with rage. Nothing less than a swim in the river will cool me,' he observed, moving off.

'Stay one instant,' she cried, running after him. 'What *am* I to say to them, then?'

'Say? Oh, say that I am in such a frightful rage you are afraid to go near me.'

'But you are not quite so bad as all that, and I am not the least afraid of you,' she returned with a smile.

'Are you not?' he said, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and looking hard at her. 'Well, you may go back and tell them that I forgive them this time for your sake, since you say that nothing else will induce the old woman to quit the premises.'

'You will not come back and say so yourself?' she asked insinuatingly.

'Not for ten thousand pounds; my forgiveness is but hollow. I should like nothing better than to give that young booby a thrashing that would surprise him, and to duck his mother in the pond. Such are my savage instincts. That is what I would do if I were a North American Indian and you were my squaw,' he concluded with a grim smile.

'Reginald, I think you have taken leave of your senses.'

'I see one thing very plainly,' he continued, walking by her side to the edge of the lawn, 'and that is, that I shall have to stay here much longer than I intended, to rehabilitate you in the good opinion of society. So be prepared to enact with me in public the part of a most united happy couple. Do you understand?' he said, throwing the end of his cigar among the laurel bushes and coming to a full stop. 'I will accompany you everywhere, carry your fans, shawls, bouquets, and other loose paraphernalia, and you'—very bitterly—'must assume a certain amount of interest and gratitude in return for my devoted solicitude. It will only be for a short time, but I see that it is an imperative though disagreeable necessity.'

So saying he turned abruptly away down a side walk, leaving Alice with tears of mortification smarting in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXI.

GEOFFREY MANŒUVRES.

AN hour later Reginald made his appearance in the library, where he found all the party assembled except Alice. Seeing him look round the room, Helen volunteered to tell him that she had gone to see a sick girl.

'What, at this time of night?'

'She went nearly an hour ago. She insisted on going, as she had not been to see Lucy Summers for some days. Alice has been so good to her all the summer—she is dying of consumption, poor girl!'

'It is quite time that Alice was home,' said her husband with authority. 'Half-past seven!' walking to the window and looking at his watch.

'Geoffrey promised to fetch her. You ought to start, Geoff,' said Helen. 'You know that this is market-night, and her abject fear of drunken men is no secret.'

'She need not go as far as the road for them,' remarked Reginald. 'Just now I met an under-gardener endeavouring to walk up both sides of the avenue at once.'

'Come, Geoff, you had better be off if you are going.'

'Oh, I'm exhausted,' replied Geoffrey. 'I really could not think of taking any more exercise to-day.'

'But you promised,' urged his cousin emphatically.

'Promised, did I?' he replied, rising languidly and deliberately arranging a cushion behind his head as he settled himself into the snuggest corner of the sofa. 'Oh, Alice is accustomed to my promises by this time; she knows they are like pie-crust—made to be broken. Besides, Alice has a young and active husband. Pedestrian exercise is good for these Anglo-Indians; let him go.'

'But, Geoffrey—'

'"But me no buts;" I won't stir till the first bell rings, if then. That girl has already run me off my legs, and if she is mad enough to start for a two-miles' walk at this time of night, I am not. I prefer lying here'—shutting his eyes—'and thinking of dinner.'

'Well, Geoffrey,' exclaimed Reginald indignantly, taking up his hat, 'if you won't go, *I* must. Where does this sick girl live?'

'Go out by the lower avenue, turn to the left, and follow your nose—it's straight, isn't it?—till you come to a plantation; go through that, and you will see a field, and in the field a cottage.

And you had better look sharp, my dear boy; it's getting late.'

As the door closed, Geoffrey started up and began capering about the room.

'Did I not do that splendidly?' he asked, stopping and rubbing his hands. 'Haven't I arranged for a nice little conjugal *tête-à-tête*, and isn't he just swearing at me! Ten to one they will have a battle-royal, but anything is better than this armed peace; the way in which they avoid each other is a most beautiful study in tactics.'

'If you will take *my* advice,' observed Mrs Mayhew, 'you will not put your finger in the pie. Leave it to time, and it will all come right.'

'I don't agree with you there,' replied Geoffrey. 'Leave all to time and it will all go wrong, unless time is assisted by kind friends, who make such judicious arrangements, as this walk for example. They require as much looking after as if it were a half-developed love affair.'

'Why should you busy yourself about them, an unfledged youngster like you?' asked the Honourable Mark peevishly.

Perfectly ignoring the question, Geoffrey stalked over to Helen, delightfully unconscious that an antimacassar was clinging to his coat-tails.

'Helen, now that we are here, "*en champ clos*"—or to translate it freely, Miss Ferrars and auntie are gone to dress, and the master and mistress are out—tell me honestly what you think about the business—will it all come right, or will he hook it off to the wars again?'

'What a way of expressing yourself! What polished ease! Well, if you want my opinion, you are quite welcome to it. I think the prospect is decidedly gloomy.'

'You do? Well, listen to me—I am certain that his cool indifference is only assumed—is that nicely expressed?—and, as to her, I daresay she

is quite ready to kiss and be friends. Suppose you break the ice with her, and I'll put out a feeler in his direction?'

'Helen,' almost shouted her husband, 'don't attempt to interfere, whatever Geoffrey may do—and he has assurance for twenty. But you'll see he will only burn his fingers,' added Mr Mayhew emphatically.

'Never mind him, Helen, you back *me* up,' urged Geoffrey eagerly.

Helen merely shook her head in reply.

'Pouff! Mrs Mayhew,' he expostulated indignantly, 'I had a much better opinion of you. You have no pluck!'

So saying, he lounged out of the room, banging the door loudly after him.

CHAPTER XXII.

'MEET ME BY MOONLIGHT ALONE.'

IN the meantime, Sir Reginald was walking rapidly in the direction of the Summers' cottage. He reached the wood, which was thickly planted, and covered about an acre of ground. Spruce and fir made it dusky even in the daytime, and now in the twilight it was almost pitch-dark. Vaulting over the stile, he followed a path till he came to another stile, near which was the cottage, as Geoffrey had described.

'I've come far enough,' he said to himself, 'and whilst I wait I'll have a smoke.' So, leaning against a tree, he struck a light, and lit at least his sixth cigar that day. After five minutes or so he saw the cottage door open, and a white dog and a slender white figure emerge, both of which

started off at a brisk run across the field, Alice collapsing to a sober walk as she neared the plantation. Stepping lightly over the stile, she advanced cautiously through the gloom, but descrying the spark at the end of her husband's cheroot, she exclaimed, as she sprang towards him and seized his arm,—

'Oh, Geoff! you good boy, I was half afraid you would not come. I never was more glad to see you—I do so hate this lonely dark wood. They say a murder was committed here years ago,' she added, drawing closer to him and shuddering. 'Come, we must be quick,' she chattered on; 'I shall get into dreadful hot water, I am so late; and I am so tired I can hardly crawl. Not that I mind, only Helen makes such a fuss if she sees me looking pale and sleepy. Why don't you speak, you lazy fellow? You are always smoking. Who would think you had such an arm,' pinching him; 'it's like a blacksmith's? The muscles feel as if they would burst the sleeve of your coat. I shall have no compunction in leaning pretty heavily, I can tell you.'

'Are you dumb, Geoffrey; or are you in the sulks?'

A sudden idea struck her. It was *not* Geoffrey after all; perhaps—agonising thought!—it was some utter stranger whom she had thus cavalierly appropriated.

'What *have* I done?' she cried, horror-struck, and endeavouring to release her hand. 'Please let me go, whoever you are,' she pleaded piteously.

By this time they were close to the road, and by the light of the newly-risen moon she saw her husband, and stood aghast.

'Geoffrey was, or said he was, too lazy to come,' he remarked, helping her over the stile, 'so I came as his substitute. I daresay you will find my arm quite as efficient a support,' coolly replacing her hand.

'Oh, but indeed,' struggling to withdraw it, and struggling in vain, 'I never dreamt it was you, or I would not—I would not—'

'Have taken such a liberty,' he interrupted. 'No, I daresay not.'

'There is no necessity to show me such politeness now,' she exclaimed hotly. 'It is only in public, as you said yourself, that you are to pay me any attention. Let my hand go, please; I can walk very well without any assistance.'

'Nevertheless, as you admitted just now that you were tired, you will have to do violence to your feelings for once and accept my arm, much as you dislike it; and if the high road is not a public place, I should like to know what is. Why did you not defer this visit till to-morrow? No wonder you are tired, after playing lawn-tennis all the afternoon. What can have possessed you to take such a walk?' he asked, slackening his pace.

'I could not have slept,' she rejoined, 'if I had not, for I had not been to see Lucy for a week, and my conscience was telling me I had neglected her.'

'Oh, then you *have* a conscience?' he observed gravely.

'Of course I have. What an odd question! Why do you ask?'

'Mere idle curiosity. Who is this Lucy Summers you have been to see?'

'A girl who is very ill; she thinks so much of my visits, poor thing! But she does me far more good than I have it in my power to do her. She is truly fit for heaven, if anyone can be so.'

'She is dying, is she not?'

'Yes, of consumption; and she is only my age. If I were like her I should be glad to go—only for Maurice.'

A long and truly eloquent silence, lasting for fully a quarter of a mile. Alice thought of the last

time they had walked together arm-in-arm up and down the long gallery at Looton, the evening before he had started for Cannes. What an age it seemed since then! What changes had occurred! He was more changed than all else, she felt, as she stole a glance at him. His clear-cut profile looked coldly severe in the moonlight; his eyes were fixed on the horizon, and his thoughts seemed at least a thousand miles away. The moon, which had risen behind the park trees, was now sailing proudly overhead, and looked down full-faced on this strangely-silent couple.

The rattle of an approaching dog-cart and the sound of a horse's hoofs aroused them from their reflections.

Two young men in evening dress, evidently going out to dinner. They favoured Alice with a hard stare, and Reginald with a knowing look, as they dashed past.

'Pretty girl!' and 'Lucky dog!' was borne upon the breeze as they rounded a corner, leaving behind them a cloud of dust.

As Alice put her hand to ward off a volume of it, her wedding-ring glittered in the moonlight, and for the first time caught her husband's eye.

'So you have replaced your wedding-ring, I see,' he observed, as they entered the avenue-gates.

'I have,' she replied in a low voice.

'What an interesting ceremony it must have been!' he remarked sarcastically.

'What *do* you mean?' asked Alice, gazing up at him with unrestrained astonishment.

'Did you swear to love, honour, and obey, Alice Fairfax? I have often heard of people being wedded to self, but such an utterly barefaced proceeding as yours I never met with before.'

Alice had never thoroughly realised till now how bitterly he had resented her treatment of his wedding-ring.

'Where is my own ring?' she asked with a reckless boldness that surprised herself.

'I wear it on my watch-chain.'

'Will you ever give it back to me?' she inquired, more and more amazed at her own audacity.

He paused and stood still for a moment, and eyeing his wife with cool unspeakable amazement, said.—

'Will I give you back your wedding-ring? When you deserve it I may; but,' he added slowly and impressively, 'as far as I can judge at present, that will *never* be.'

He felt her little hand tremble on his arm, he saw her lips quiver, a mist come over her deep-fringed eyes. Seized with sudden compunction, he said,—

'I am afraid I am always giving you rude, brusque answers, but you brought this on yourself. The past three years have not been calculated to improve a man's temper, have they?'

She looked up.

'You know you don't deserve your wedding-ring, do you?' said he, taking her hand. 'Do you?' he added pertinaciously.

'I suppose not,' faltered Alice, gulping down her tears with a painful effort.

'You *suppose* not!' he echoed impatiently. 'Well, I am very certain you don't; and the ring is likely to remain in my keeping.'

By this time they had reached the hall door-steps, where Geoffrey, in full evening dress and the usual flower in his button-hole, was awaiting them.

'At last!' he exclaimed. 'So you have really come home. Well, you did not hurry yourselves,' he said, escorting them into the hall. 'We began to think you had eloped—gone off together into some elegant retirement in the style of a second honeymoon.'

'Geoffrey!' cried Alice, in an agony of blushes.

'Don't "Geoffrey" me, my good girl, but go and get ready for dinner as quickly as you can; I'm *starving*.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

SIR REGINALD FAIRFAX AT HOME.

'I NEVER knew such an unmitigated young idiot!' exclaimed Sir Reginald the next morning at breakfast, as he tossed aside a letter, and tore open a paper with a rustle of impatience.

'You are not alluding to any of the present company, I trust?' asked Geoffrey mildly, as he helped himself lavishly to marmalade.

'No,' returned his cousin, without raising his eyes from the perusal of some interesting piece of military news, 'no; only one of our fellows at the depôt.'

'Go on, I'm thirsting for particulars. What has he been doing? Getting married?'

'Setting up a racing-stable,' replied Sir Reginald, laying down the paper; 'and he knows as much about the Turf as—as—' looking round for a simile —'Maurice. He has a horse in for these Sundown Races on Friday; a new purchase, called'—referring to the note—'Tornado, and has backed him heavily, of course.'

'Tornado,' echoed Geoffrey; 'I know the brute well—a pulling, tearing, mad chestnut. He won the Chester Cup when Langstaffe had him. But he is a real devil to ride. He killed one jockey—bolted into a stable with him—and Langstaffe has had to pay up well for the support of his widow and children. I congratulate your young friend. Is he going to ride him himself?'

'No. As far as equestrian feats are concerned,

he considers discretion to be the mother of all virtues; he will put up a professional, of course.'

'Well, I hope he may be able to hold him, and keep him within the flags, that's all,' returned Geoffrey, with a doubtful shake of the head; 'he can gallop and stay like a good 'un, if he chooses, but I'll take odds he bolts.'

'I find I have to go to town this morning,' said Sir Reginald, addressing himself to the whole circle. 'Barker wants me to meet him to-day about some old leases; very probably I shall not come back till to-morrow night.'

'Then, my dear Regy, you will bring me down my watch from Benson's,' cried Helen eagerly. 'And I want some arosane and crewel wools; a few dark green and yellow shades to finish—'

'No; there I draw the line,' he interrupted with a laugh; 'anything but fancy work! Imagine my going into a wool shop, and being discovered by some of my lady friends! I dare not trust myself to answer for the consequences.'

'Don't forget to go to the Army and Navy Stores and order some new tennis bats,' observed Alice, without raising her eyes from an engrossing letter.

'And bring me a couple of boxes of cigarettes, as per usual,' put in Geoffrey.

'Yes; anything else?' replied Sir Reginald, entering these items rapidly in his note-book.

'You might bring down another box of books from Mudie's,' added Helen suavely; 'I'll just make out a list,' rising and pushing back her chair and hastening into the next room.

'Well, don't be long, Helen, as I am going off immediately. You may as well drive over to Manister and leave me at the station, Geoffrey. It will help you to kill your arch-enemy, Time. The trap will be round in ten minutes.'

. . . . . .

The next day Sir Reginald, having transacted

his business and all the commissions, was strolling down Pall Mall when he was suddenly brought to a stand still by a vigorous slap on the back, and, turning round, he found himself confronting Captain Vaughan and Captain Campell.

'The very man I want!' exclaimed the latter eagerly.

'How fit you look, old fellow!' cried Captain Vaughan, devouring his late patient with his eyes and wringing his hand in an agonising grasp.

'When did you come to town? Where are you staying? Come on to the club and tell us all about yourself,' they chimed alternately.

During luncheon, Mr Campell ejaculated, 'Talk of coincidences! Do you know that, five minutes before we overtook you, Fairfax, I had just sent you a telegram, and, as we turned into Pall Mall, you were almost the first man we saw! Odd, wasn't it?' 'That's Fairfax, I bet you a fiver,' said Vaughan; 'I could swear to his walk—subdued cavalry swagger.' And sure enough he was right for once. I'm in a most awful hat this time, and no mistake; and you are the only fellow who can pull me through,' he added, leaning both elbows on the table, and looking at his friend with an air of grave conviction.

'I?' echoed Sir Reginald. 'How? What do you mean? I haven't the faintest glimmering idea of what you are driving at.'

'You know I have a horse in for the Sundown Races?'

A nod was his reply.

'At the last moment—the eleventh hour—my jockey has thrown me over—last night actually—and the race comes off to-morrow. Where am I to get another unless you'll ride for me?' imploringly. 'If you don't,' he resumed, 'I shall be smashed—horse, foot, and dragoons. Already the horse has fallen tremendously in the betting; but I

won't hedge a farthing!' with a resolute thump of his fist; 'I mean to be a man or a mouse.'

'But why pitch on Fairfax like this?' said Captain Vaughan irritably. 'I told you, when you were sending the telegram, how uncommonly cool I thought you. One would think he was gentleman-rider to the regiment. How you have the cheek to ask him to ride such a brute, considering his broken arm and his only just coming off the sick-list, is more than I can understand,' puffing resentfully at his cigar.

'Oh, Fairfax can manage anything. Tornado is not half so bad as that devil of Wyndham's he rode at Poonah. Riding is child's play to him.' Turning to Sir Reginald: 'You will ride for me, won't you?' he asked confidently. 'If I don't win this race it will be all U P. I shall have to send in my papers and volunteer as a trooper in one of those Cape regiments.'

'Come, I hope you are not so bad as all that. I must see what I can do; but I'm not by any means the wonderful jockey you imagine.'

'You will ride him, you will! I knew it. You were always a brick!' cried Captain Campell ecstatically, jumping up with such energy as to overset his chair with a loud crash.

'For Heaven's sake, sit down and compose yourself!' exclaimed Captain Vaughan angrily, 'unless you want the people to think you are a subject for personal restraint. Fairfax,' turning to his brother-officer with solemnity, 'does your wife allow you to ride races?'

'My wife'—reddening—'allows me to do whatever I please.'

'What a matrimonial *rara avis*!' muttered Captain Vaughan under his breath.

'You will ride for me, Fairfax? I depend on you,' said Captain Campell.

'Yes, I'll ride for you, though you have given

me awfully short notice; but, remember, I don't guarantee that I'll win.'

'Oh, no fear of that if you can only hold him,' frankly returned his brother-officer, leaning across the table and volubly expatiating on the horse's merits—age, pedigree, and performances—and giving a long and confidential *résumé* of his temper and traits. 'His groom, who knows him well, will give you a wrinkle or two before the race comes off to-morrow. He and the horse started yesterday, and we,' indicating Captain Vaughan and himself, 'run down to-night. You can't think what a load you have taken off my mind,' he added, heaving a deep sigh.

'Have you telegraphed for rooms at the hotel?' inquired Captain Vaughan, always practical.

'No, by Jove!—I never thought about it.'

Little as Sir Reginald was prepared to expose his domestic concerns to public criticism, he felt that it behoved him to extend some hospitality to his two brother-officers—one of them his particular friend, so he exclaimed, with well-feigned cordiality,—

'Sundown is in our part of the world—only eight miles from our place. Of course you will both come to Monkswood, and I can drive you over to the races to-morrow.'

'Thanks, my dear fellow, we shall be delighted,' returned Mr Campell warmly, 'if it won't be putting you out—nor Lady Fairfax?'

'Lady Fairfax will be very glad to see you. I am going down by the 4.30, and we might travel together. It is now,' pulling out his watch, 'five minutes past three; I must go and get my traps. Whatever you do, don't be late, Vaughan. I leave you to take charge of Campell, who never was in time in his life—not even for an Indian train.'

The two hussars were not a little curious to see Fairfax as a family man. What was his home

like? his surroundings? his wife? There must be something odd about her. She had always been shrouded in mystery, but now the veil was about to be pulled aside, and their long-starved curiosity would be satisfied at last!

4.30 found Sir Reginald and his two guests comfortably settled in a smoking carriage, slowly gliding out of Waterloo Station *en route* for Monkswood; but, owing to a stoppage on the line they arrived at Manister fully two hours behind time.

'Anything here for me?' inquired Sir Reginald of a gracious porter.

'No, sir; the dog-cart waited till the half-hour and then went home; but Blake said as how he would come for the express.'

'How far is it to your place?' asked Mr Campell.

'Only two miles and a half by the fields.'

'Then I vote we walk. Anything is better than a stifling fly this fine warm evening. "Quick march" is the word,' gaily shouldering his umbrella.

His motion was carried unanimously, and, leaving their luggage to be despatched in their wake, they started off at a smart pace, each armed with a cheroot.

The great event of the following day was the one topic of Mr Campell's conversation. Sir Reginald lent him a ready ear, and together they made arrangements for an early visit to Tornado the next morning; they discussed weights, saddles, handicappers, and bits with much animation and enthusiasm, Captain Vaughan walking rather behind them, and smoking sullenly.

'If he's as good as you say, he ought to be first past the post to-morrow, for his company is, after all, only second-rate; and if he does pull off this race, I want you to promise me one thing, Campell.'

'I'll promise you any earthly thing, my dear fellow,' returned Captain Campell impulsively,

stopping for an instant in the narrow moonlit path to give full emphasis to his asseveration.

'You will sell Tornado directly the meeting is over, and give up racing for the next five years.'

'You may make your mind easy on that score. "A burnt child dreads the fire!" and I have been badly singed. If I can only pull my chestnuts out all right this time, I'll never go near the Turf again.'

'It is much easier to make good resolutions than to keep them,' growled Captain Vaughan from the rear. 'If you lose, no doubt it will be all plain sailing for this high resolve of yours; but if you win, it will be another matter. Having once tasted blood, it will be hard to choke off your racing instincts. Why not scratch Tornado for to-morrow's engagement, and commence this reformation *before* the race?'

'Hear him!' cried Captain Campell angrily; 'and my four thousand and odd pounds, where would they be? Your advice is no doubt kindly meant, Vaughan; but we all know that "*Il est plus facile d'être sage pour les autres que de l'être pour soi-même.*" I shall not begin my reformation, as you call it, until the day after to-morrow.'

Half-an-hour's brisk walking brought the three pedestrians near Monkswood. They crossed the park—how weird it looked in the moonlight!—and the house itself—what an imposing pile! They traversed the smooth-shaven pleasure-ground and ascended the shallow steps, where wide-open French windows gave forth streams of light and peals of laughter. They looked in, and this is what they saw: A long, low, old-fashioned room, brilliantly lighted and most luxuriously furnished—flowers, pictures, china, caught the eye on every side. A space had been cleared, and a dancing lesson was evidently in full swing. Close to the

window, with her back to them, stood a young lady in a pink dress; beside her a portly, middle-aged man was holding out his coat-tails and capering insanely. He was evidently being initiated in the 'trois temps' by a lovely girl opposite, in black net, with quantities of natural, pale-blush roses pinned into the bodice of her dress and her hair. She was slim, graceful, beautiful, and looked about nineteen. A handsome matron in black satin was playing a waltz mechanically, as she looked over her shoulder at the dancing. An old lady in a monumental cap was peering over her spectacles with intense amusement, and a long-legged youth had thrown himself into a chair in absolute convulsions of laughter. Having at length got breath, he said,—

'Go on, Alice; go on. Show him once more.'

The young lady in black, thus adjured, held up her dress in front and modestly displayed a pair of the prettiest, most fairylike Louis Quatorze shoes, and the slenderest of black silk ankles.

'Now, Mark,' she said, authoritatively, 'mind this is the *last* time. One foot forward, so; bring up the other, and turn, so, one, two, three—one, two, three; nothing can be easier. Are you looking?'

'Of course he is looking. Do you take him for a fool? Isn't he looking at the prettiest pair of ankles in Great Britain?'

'Geoffrey,' retorted the girl, without turning her head, 'I'm coming to box your ears directly. Go on, Mark,' she proceeded, encouragingly; 'if I could only reach round your waist I'd dance gentleman, and then you would soon get into it.'

Mark accordingly went on according to his lights, and the result was a perfect roar of laughter, in which Sir Reginald joined most heartily, and so betrayed his whereabouts. He and his friends

advanced into the room, and he presented them to the girl in black.

'His wife!'

They had barely recovered from their astonishment before she had left the room to see about preparations for them, and to order an impromptu supper, which was speedily organised in a grand old dining-room.

Thither all proceeded, and a merrier party seldom sat down at Monkswood. As lively sallies and witty remarks were rapidly bandied about, and topic after topic was started, discussed, and dismissed, Captains Vaughan and Campell's eyes frequently met.

'Could this be Fairfax's home, this lovely girl his wife, and these charmingly amusing, well-bred people his relations? Then why did he stay in India? Where was the skeleton in the cupboard?'

He was telling a story he had heard in town of an Irish wedding, where, by some blunder, the best man drove off with the bride by mistake. Declaring that to stop was unlucky, nothing would induce the coachman to pull up or turn back. Meanwhile, the wretched bridegroom was pursuing them afoot, and running the gauntlet of a score of ragamuffins, who pelted him with stones and mud.

'*You* took precious good care that such a mistake did not occur, Regy!' said Geoffrey, with a broad grin. 'I had not much chance of driving off with you, Alice, had I? You remember how I wanted to come with you in the carriage from church, and how he nearly slammed my fingers in the door of the brougham, eh?'

Why did Lady Fairfax become scarlet, and Fairfax assume an air of rapt consideration of the pattern of the tablecloth? Why did they so seldom address each other?—what was the meaning of the coolness between them?

Captain Vaughan made up his mind to watch them narrowly. But Captain Campell was far too much taken up with the topic nearest his heart, to give the subject more than passing attention, and said,—

'Lady Fairfax, are you coming to the races to-morrow? Capital races at Sundown.'

'N—o—I think not,' looking across at her husband interrogatively.

'Oh!' responding to her glance, '*he* is going right enough. He is to ride my horse, don't you know—Tornado. I can't get a jockey, and if I could now I would not change for the best professional in England.'

'Do you mean that my husband is going to ride?' she asked, with a quiver of consternation in her voice.

'Yes; it is awfully good of him, is it not?'

'Awfully good of him,' she repeated mechanically, her face as white as the cloth.

'Reginald, you are not really going to ride Tornado?' said Geoffrey incredulously. 'If you are, I hope you have made your will.'

'I have made my will, and I have made up my mind to ride Tornado. Come to the races to-morrow and see him win.'

'Or see you killed,' replied Geoffrey; 'which?'

'You are a Job's comforter with a vengeance. Your remarks are certainly not calculated to inspire a nervous man with confidence. Let us make a move to the drawing-room,' observed Reginald, anxious to avoid further discussion and the objections he sees that Helen and Mark are preparing to hurl at him, and determined to postpone the struggle.

The party in the drawing-room scattered about and broke up into groups of twos and threes. Miss Ferrars and Captain Campell strolled to the piano, and Captain Vaughan laid himself out to

improve his acquaintance with Lady Fairfax. As he drew a chair near the table at which she was sitting, she said,—

'Captain Vaughan, I am so very glad to see you. I know how much I owe you; how you nursed my husband through the worst of his illness. I never can sufficiently thank you—'

'Do not,' he interrupted; 'it is not necessary. I owe him more than that. You do not know what a blow it would have been to all of us if anything had happened to him. You can't think how much he has made himself beloved by both officers and men.'

Alice blushed deeply, and looked far more pleased than if she had received a direct personal compliment.

'I am sure he is,' she said, in a low voice. 'Nevertheless, you must let me thank you. I have often and often longed to do so. I only wish I had some way of showing you how grateful I am,' she added, looking at him with dewy wistful eyes.

'What a perfectly bewitching face! What a domestic treasure Reginald has kept quietly buried here! She would more than hold her own with the best "professionals,"' he mused, as he glanced at her furtively, whilst he pulled his long tawny moustache.

Reginald, and Reginald's exploits, formed the topic of their conversation. His hostess made the very best of listeners, and eagerly drank in all the details of her husband's campaign, his rash adventure, and his illness.

'She is an angel!' thought Captain Vaughan rapturously.

He was by no means a ladies' man. Nevertheless, it was a wholly gratifying sensation to have this lovely young creature hanging on his words, as though his lips were veritably dropping the legendary pearls and diamonds.

Presently the hero of his tale joined them, and, throwing himself into an easy-chair, said, as he crossed his legs,—

'We must make an early start to-morrow, Vaughan.'

'I suppose so,' responded his friend discontentedly. 'I think the whole thing is madness! You are not fit to ride a race. I wonder'—turning abruptly to Alice—'I wonder you allow him to ride, Lady Fairfax.'

'I wish I could prevent him,' she replied, with an appealing look towards her husband.

'Why don't you enforce your wifely authority?'

The subject of their conversation was apparently engrossed in the contemplation of his exceedingly well-cut boots, and did not seem to hear them.

'Do you hear, Fairfax? Your wife takes my view altogether. You are not to ride to-morrow.'

'My wife,' he replied, looking up and transferring his eyes to her, 'knows perfectly well that we never interfere in each other's affairs. "Live and let live" is our motto, is it not, Alice?'

'Yes,' she responded, with a forced smile; but she added timidly, 'I do very much wish you would not ride for Mr Campell; he is a most dangerous animal. You heard what Geoffrey said.'

'Said that Mr Campell was a dangerous animal?' he asked, with a look of comical interrogation.

'No,' she replied petulantly; 'the horse, I mean. Please do not ride him. I will only ask this once,' she pleaded earnestly.

'Sorry I can't oblige you, Alice. I have given my word—and you know,' he added significantly, 'I never break *my* promises.'

Alice, deeply hurt, turned away to hide her discomposure, and joined the group at the piano without another word. Captain Vaughan looked at his friend with unmeasured indignation; certainly he did not shine in home life. There had

been a time when he thought no woman under the sun a fitting mate for Sir Reginald Fairfax, but now it appeared to him that Sir Reginald was hardly worthy of his wife!

Could she be the very same Alice to whom, when he thought himself dying, his last words and messages were sent? 'Tell her I loved her—always!' Loved her, indeed! He has a curious way of showing it, thought his brother-officer, with rising anger.

His looks of unqualified disapproval were entirely thrown away on his friend, who was busily endeavouring to balance a paper-cutter on the tip of one of his fingers, and never once raised his eyes. Captain Vaughan, rising suddenly, and giving his chair a violent push, that was in itself an angry expostulation, went over to the piano and joined the rest of the party in begging their hostess for just one song.

. . . . . .

When all had left the drawing-room, excepting her husband, Alice lingered behind. He was setting the clock on the mantelpiece and did not observe her where she was kneeling, beside the piano, putting away some music. When all the songs and books had been neatly arranged she stole a glance at him. He was standing with his back to the fireplace, just as she had seen him for the first time at Malta; but oh, how different he was! He looked sterner and older, and instead of a gay smile there was a hard, cynical expression on his lips as he gazed into vacancy.

She felt that she was afraid of him, but, all the same, she would speak and endeavour to dissuade him from riding for Captain Campell. No matter what he said, no matter how he froze her, she would be heard; she was his wife.

Rising to her feet, she approached slowly and hesitatingly. Her husband eyed her with cool surprise as she came close up to him.

'Reginald,' she said, 'will nothing prevent your riding this race to-morrow?'

'Nothing,' he calmly replied, 'unless the horse dies.'

'Could not Burke, the groom, ride him? He was a jockey once,' she asked timidly.

'Burke!' contemptuously. 'Burke weighs at least twelve stone. His riding days are over. Why not suggest Mark at once?' with a supercilious smile.

'Could you not get some substitute?'

'No. Pray, why should I? Campell has asked me to ride—I have consented. *Voilà tout.*'

'But,' she urged, nervously twisting her bangles, 'I do wish you would have nothing to say to him. They say the reason Captain Campell could not get a jockey was that the horse had such a bad name. Say you will not ride him,' she pleaded brokenly. 'Do, for *my* sake. I will tell Captain Campell that he must find another jockey, as I will not allow you to ride.'

'I don't know on what grounds you should ask me to do anything for your sake.'

A silence.

'As to not allowing me to ride,' he continued, with polite irony, 'I'm afraid I cannot admit your authority.'

He felt he was brutally rude: but in rudeness was his safety. Another such look as she had just given him and he was a lost man. The farce of 'Ward not Wife' would be played out, all his stern resolutions thrown to the winds, and he would have to surrender his pride, his self-respect, his word of honour. She was so close to him that he could feel the perfume of the roses in her hair, and see a stray eyelash on her cheek. He moved to one side and, steadily looking at the floor, said,—

'I could not break my word to Campell. If Tornado wins to-morrow he has promised me to

give up his stud. If he loses, he will be ruined, and will have to sell out. Besides, it is not a steeple-chase, only a flat race. Nothing very alarming in that, is there?'

'Not quite so bad; but bad enough. The horse did kill one man, why not another?' looking awfully white.

'Well, if he kills me to-morrow' (cheerfully), 'you can put it in your marriage settlements that your second husband is not to ride races.'

Without another word or look, Alice turned and left the room.

'Stay a moment,' said her husband, cutting off her indignant retreat across the hall and politely lighting her candle. 'Listen to me, Alice. What will you give me if, after to-morrow, I promise never to ride another race?' looking at her with serious eyes.

'Will you promise me that' (eagerly) 'really and truly?' accepting the candlestick. 'Then it is to be a bargain, remember.'

'How can it be a bargain, as you call it, if the transaction is to be all on one side? If I promise this, what are you going to do for me?' he asked, with questioning gaze.

'Promise, and I'll tell you,' she said archly.

'Well,' speaking slowly and with grave expectation in his eyes, 'I promise; and what then?'

'Then, if you like,' she replied, blushing furiously and holding her candle well between his face and hers, 'then I'll—give you a kiss.'

'A kiss!' he stammered, very much taken aback.

'A kiss,' he repeated, reddening; for a second he hesitated, then said in a low voice, as he turned to take up his candle, 'No, thank you, Alice.'

Alice seized the opportunity to make her escape, and when her husband had turned his head she was gone.

'After that,' he muttered to himself as he

leisurely ascended the stairs, 'I can resist anything. I have put St Anthony himself completely in the shade. His temptress was not a quarter as pretty as mine, I'll swear. But if I had taken it, I should have had to take a dozen, and thus lay down my arms. Better as it is. better as it is. I'm not likely to be tempted in the same way twice,' he added, with a sigh.

Meanwhile Alice had fled along the long corridor and locked herself in her dressing-room. 'No, thank you, Alice,' was still ringing in her ears. She sat with her face buried in her hands for nearly a quarter of an hour. To have offered a kiss to a man and been refused, even though that man was her husband, what shame! what indignity! Her very throat and forehead were dyed with blushes as she thought of it. 'What does he mean? Why does he treat me so? He dislikes me, that is very evident. Am I uglier, less attractive than I used to be? Did he marry me *only* for my pretty face, and am I pretty no longer?' she asked herself as she looked into her glass. But no, the glass declared she was prettier than ever, as, with both elbows on the table, she studied her reflection critically, and saw clouds of lovely golden-brown hair, perfect features, a flawless skin, over which the blushes were chasing each other rapidly. 'I am as pretty as ever,' she said to herself dispassionately. "Can he be a little wrong in his head?' she mused. 'Can his wounds and the Indian sun have affected his reason? Mad people always evince a dislike to their nearest and dearest; but, no, impossible. Reginald mad!' she must be insane herself to think so; and oh, doubly, trebly mad to have put herself in the way of meeting such a rebuff as she had received that evening.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CARDIGAN.

THE next morning all was bustle and confusion at Monkswood; the Mayhews and Miss Ferrars had decided to go to the races, and the high-stepping, supercilious-looking carriage-horses were to do a good day's work for once.

Nothing would induce Alice to join the party, but she busied herself all the morning looking after the cold luncheon which was to be taken to the course, and helping Helen and Mary to make gorgeous race toilettes. By mutual consent, she and her husband had carefully avoided each other, but just as the latter was about to start, he discovered that a button was coming off his light overcoat. The dog-cart, in which Captain Campell was already seated, was waiting at the door, and there was not a moment to be lost.

'Call Alice,' cried the ever-officious Geoffrey; 'she has just mended me. There she is in the hall.'

'Alice, come here with your needle.'

Alice, entering the library, found that she had to operate on her husband this time, which was more than either of them had bargained for; but there was no help for it, with Captain Vaughan and Geoffrey standing by. She had scarcely commenced her task ere they left the room and went out to the dog-cart, leaving her alone with Reginald. She ventured to steal a glance at him, he stood still as a statue, without so much as the flickering of an eyelash, whilst her fingers trembled a good deal, and her heart beat so loudly she was afraid he could hear it. As he had not removed his coat they were brought into uncommonly close contact, and the top of her head was dangerously near to his moustache. Very quickly and silently she stitched, without again raising her eyes. Through his open

coat she perceived his scarlet silk racing-jacket and faultless breeches and boots.

'What are you looking so serious about?' he suddenly asked. 'Why are you so pale? There is no occasion to keep up appearances; we are alone. Pray don't feign anxiety about me—that you really don't feel; you know very well you don't care a straw whether I break my neck or not.'

He was in a merciless humour; many sleepless hours had he brooded on his wrongs, and wrath and contempt were uppermost.

Alice made no reply, but having sewn on the button, twisted the thread off with a sharp snap.

'Well, good-bye,' he said, holding out a dogskin-covered hand and looking at her keenly. 'Don't overact the part. At present you are superb. Any bystander now would be fool enough to think —that you cared for me. You and I know better than *that*, don't we?' he added, with a curious smile, as he opened his cigar-case and carefully selected a cheroot.

'Rex, are you coming?' shouted Geoffrey. In another moment he had taken his seat in the dog-cart, the pawing, fiery chesnut had 'got his head,' and the trio were bowling down the avenue at a liberal ten miles an hour.

Alice stood in the window for fully twenty minutes; her lips trembled, her bosom heaved.

'How dared he! How dared he!' she whispered, as the blood mounted to her pale face, and her whole frame quivered with anger at his taunts. But her indignation, as was usually the case, quickly died away—it gave place to 'apprehension's sudden glow.' 'Supposing he was brought home badly hurt—or dead? Supposing that those dark eyes, that had just now looked at her so scornfully, were closed for ever ere nightfall?' The very idea was more than she could bear. She would busy herself all day, and not give herself time to think.

Drying her eyes, she ran upstairs, and helped Helen and Mary to put the finishing touches to their toilettes ; and pressed on Mary a perfect parasol, arranged Helen's bonnet and veil satisfactorily, and saw them off from the hall-door steps with many smiles and good wishes.

Although Alice wore a smiling face in public, and her gaiety and buoyant spirits were the amazement of Helen and her aunt, yet her heart was heavy enough, and when alone, escorted by the dogs, strolling through the woods with idle, aimless footsteps, her face was very downcast and sad. The task of regaining her husband's affection seemed to be altogether beyond her; all her advances were coldly repulsed ; she would venture no farther. Perhaps were she to emulate his own studied indifference, he might think more of her.

Men never cared for what was easily gained; probably he despised her for her humility. Well, she would assert herself, and meet him on his own ground as a last resource. 'He pleases himself; I shall please myself, and I shall ride Cardigan this very afternoon,' she said aloud, as she entered the hall and flung her hat on a chair.

. . . . . .

Sundown races were very popular, and the present meeting augured a great success. The stand was crowded, and the course at either side was lined three deep with carriages, gay with bonnets and parasols. Every small eminence and every box-seat was seized as a coign of vantage.

As the big race of the day was about to be run, five starters emerged from the paddock, slender and sleek-coated, mounted by jockeys gorgeous in every colour of the rainbow.

Tornado's appearance excited considerable sensation as he took his preliminary canter. He was a remarkably handsome animal, and was handled to admiration by his jockey.

'Who is the fellow riding him?' asked one of the Steepshire magnates. 'Seems to know what he is about. That brute takes a lot of riding.'

'It's ten to one if he does not bolt,' replied a supremely horsey little man. 'If he could be kept on the course he'd run away with the race, but he has a nasty awkward temper and a gentleman jock riding him. Precious little good his four pounds will do him in this case. They are making Dado a hot favourite.'

'Who is the gentleman jock?' reiterated his companion.

On reference to the correct card, they saw 'Captain Campell's Tornado; scarlet jacket, black cap, Sir Reginald Fairfax.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed a pompous D.L., 'who would expect to see him here? Good-looking fellow—wonder he likes to come into the neighbourhood, considering all things. Wonder where he is stopping?'

The flag dropped to a capital start, and they were off, Tornado making a determined but useless attempt to bolt. Those wrists that were guiding him were of steel, and kept him on the course willy-nilly. He had his master on his back he soon discovered; his runaway tendency was turned to good account, for his rider, knowing him to be a stayer, forced him through the other horses and cut out the work at a terrific pace, which he kept up throughout, having a clear lead halfway up the straight, and winning easily by six lengths.

Sir Reginald, who was now recognised by many of the neighbouring gentry and farmers, who remembered him a lad on his pony, was cheered loudly as he piloted his horse through the crowd to the weighing-stand. Some of the neighbouring *élite* came up and claimed his acquaintance, and overpowered him with congratulations. He

received them with a distant politeness none knew how to assume better than himself, and declining various offers of luncheon, arm-in-arm with the radiant Captain Campell, made his way to the Fairfax landau, where he was received as a hero indeed. *This*, victory was something palpable, and Helen felt a pleasing consciousness that their carriage was the cynosure of many eyes and many opera-glasses, as her cousin shared the box-seat with Mary Ferrars.

'Where is she?' was whispered behind more than one fan among the ladies on the stand. 'How odd it is that he should have come into the neighbourhood! How handsome he is, and how much he is to be pitied, poor fellow!'

The 'poor fellow' made a capital luncheon, lost several pairs of gloves to the two ladies, and suddenly announced his intention of going home.

'Going home!' echoed Geoffrey; 'why, there are two more races on the card. You are not serious?' he said, gazing at him with might and main.

'I am, indeed; the best of the day is over, and I want to get off before the crowd begins to make a rush. You can all stay, if you like.'

'I'll go with you,' said Captain Vaughan; 'I'm sick of races, and we will jog home quietly and escape the dust.'

Well he guessed his friend's intention—he was going home to set his wife's mind at rest, and he *was*. Her pale face and trembling fingers had risen up more than once reproachfully before his mind's eye, and he felt both remorseful and penitent for his undoubted rudeness. Cautiously steering through the crowd, they were soon on their road home, smoking and discussing the events of the day; as they trotted through the cool country lanes, both had the pleasing inward conviction that they were doing the 'right thing.'

Within a mile of Monkswood the sound of a horse galloping close by in a field arrested their attention. Soon he came in sight—a powerful raking chesnut, ridden by a lady. Pulling him up gradually to a canter, she trotted him up to a hog-backed stile, over which she landed him in the most workmanlike manner into the road, a hundred yards ahead of the dog-cart, which evidently was a vehicle not to his taste, for the instant he caught sight of it he turned sharp round and bolted in the opposite direction.

The lady was Alice, the horse Cardigan. In two minutes she had reduced him to obedience, and, returning at a trot, ranged up alongside of the dog-cart. Her light hand seemed to have a wonderfully soothing effect on the fiery fretting chesnut. She had evidently given him a good gallop, if one was to judge by the state of heat he was in and the lather on his sides, and so subdued his exuberant impulses, but his wild eye and nervous ears spoke volumes: 'Only for the lady on my back,' they said, 'I would think very little of jumping into that dog-cart.'

'So you have come back?' exclaimed Alice cheerfully, 'and not on a shutter,' with a glance at her husband.

'So you see,' he replied shortly.

'After all, it was only a flat race! I need not have been so frightened. Did you win?'

'He did, splendidly! by six lengths, hands down,' replied Captain Vaughan enthusiastically. 'You ought to have been there to see for yourself, Lady Fairfax. There has been capital racing.'

'What has brought you home so early?' she asked, not noticing his suggestion.

'Oh, we had had enough of it; the best races had been run, and we thought we would get away before the crowd.'

'Alice,' said her husband, suddenly tossing away

his cigar, 'I thought I had forbidden you to ride Cardigan?'

'Did you!' she replied airily; 'just in the same way that I *forbid* you to ride races,' and she laughed as she leant over and patted Cardigan's neck. '"Live and let live" is our motto, is it not, Captain Vaughan?'

'*You* won't live long, at any rate, if you persist in riding that brute,' returned her husband angrily.

'He calls you a brute, Mr C.; do you hear that? You and I understand each other perfectly,' she said, stooping forward again and patting his hard neck, thereby more fully displaying her perfect figure and her perfectly-cut habit.

'You have torn your glove, Lady Fairfax. Why, the whole palm is gone!' exclaimed Captain Vaughan.

'Oh, it's nothing,' she replied, looking at it hurriedly, but not before a deep red weal across her delicate white palm was visible to both gentlemen.

'He pulls a good bit, does he not?' asked Captain Vaughan dubiously.

'A little, when he is fresh; but he knows me. All the grooms are afraid of him, and he knows that; but I'm not a bit afraid of you, am I?' addressing herself once more to her steed, and emphasising her remark with a touch of her whip.

His reply was a plunge that would have unseated a less experienced rider. Another touch of the whip—another plunge.

Captain Vaughan looked askance at his friend. For a man who had just won a race, on an awkward horse, in a first-class manner, he looked decidedly nervous. Never had Captain Vaughan seen fear written on Reginald Fairfax's face till now, and there it was plainly to be seen, as Cardigan executed plunge after plunge before them down the road. Subdued at last by his mistress's voice, they again joined the dog-cart.

'Alice,' said her husband, administering a wicked but quiet cut to the dog-cart horse, 'you'll never ride Cardigan again after to-day.'

'Oh, sha'n't I? Who is to prevent me?' she asked, innocent wonder depicted on her pretty face.

'I will,' he replied emphatically.

'Do not be too sure of that,' she returned, with a smile at Captain Vaughan that exasperated her husband beyond description. 'Farewell for the present; here is a lovely piece of turf,' and with a careless wave of her hand she turned off the avenue and was soon galloping away across the park at the top of Cardigan's speed.

The two young men watched her in dead silence till she disappeared behind a clump of trees.

'By Jove! how she rides!' exclaimed Captain Vaughan, in a tone of enthusiastic admiration.

'Vaughan,' said his friend solemnly, as he withdrew his eyes from the vanishing horsewoman, 'let me give you a piece of advice; take it as coming from one who speaks from experience. Whatever folly—whatever madness you may be guilty of, be warned by me, and *never marry!*'

CHAPTER XXV.

'A KISS, AND NOTHING MORE.'

MR AND MRS MAYHEW had gone on a visit to some friends at the other end of the county, and the young people, left to their own devices, instituted a riding-party into Manister. Alice was mounted on a new purchase—a perfect animal in appearance and manner—a bay mare with black points, who fully justified the name she had brought with her—'Look at Me'—and the three hundred guineas Sir Reginald had paid to her late owner.

Cardigan he reserved for himself, and Cardigan, in mad spirits, kept plunging and shying and indulging in formidable antics all the way down the avenue, setting an infamous example to the other horses.

'I must take it out of this fellow,' said his master, sending him at a low fence that separated the road from a long series of large grass fields.

In another instant Look at Me was beside him. Together they galloped the length of three or four fields, their riders just steadying them at their fences, which consisted of one or two low hedges, a couple of sheep hurdles, and a semi-Irish bank.

The pace, the breeze, and, above all, the exhilarating exercise, made Alice's spirits rise to quite their former standard. With brilliant cheeks and sparkling eyes, she looked the Alice of other days.

Bringing his horse to a walk, and casting an approving glance at his companion, her husband said,—

'I see you ride as well as ever, Alice, if not better!'

'I am fonder of it, if that is anything,' she replied, giving her habit a business-like twitch. 'It's the only thing I care for in the way of amusement. I seem to be able to ride away from myself, to forget all my troubles, and to be Alice Saville once more.'

'You would like to be Alice Saville again, no doubt,' said her husband quietly, looking at her steadily.

No answer.

'Alice, did you hear me?' leaning towards her and placing his hand on her horse's crest.

'Yes, I heard you. You are not my father-confessor, be pleased to remember,' she replied, closing her lips resolutely. She felt an insane desire to tease him, and proceeded, 'Perhaps, if you tell me two or three things, I will tell you.'

'Go on, then. What do you wish to know?'

'In the first place, am I as pretty as I was as Alice Saville?'

'Really—I—I have never given the subject a thought.' (Oh, Reginald!)

'Well; go on. I'm waiting.'

'Yes'—looking at her boldly and taking in every item of her fair high-bred face, mischievous smile, and lovely laughing eyes,—'I suppose you are.'

What a rude, indefinite way of putting it!

'Is my riding as good as ever?'

'Yes,' most emphatically.

'Is my temper improved?'

'How can I tell? I have had no practical demonstration of one of your passions as yet. But I should say—your temper was now as equable and unruffled as the corn in that field.'

'How is *yours?*' abruptly.

'Mine! Much as usual, thank you,' with an amused, superior smile.

'Well, now, as you have answered my questions, it is only fair to answer yours.'

'Yes,' he replied, looking at her eagerly.

'I would rather'—emphasising every word—'be Alice *Somebody* than anyone else in the whole world. *Now*, are you much wiser?' she added, giving him a mischievous glance.

'Of course! I KNOW, Alice, although you won't tell me. But even if we had never met, you would not be Alice Saville now; so what is the good of wishing for your maiden-name? You would have been married long ago—subject to my consent,' with a sardonic smile he could not express.

'We *were* very happy once, Reg,' she said, with a deep sigh. 'Neither of us had tempers—once. Have you forgotten?'

He has not forgotten; he never can forget. Nevertheless, he abruptly put an end to her reminiscence, saying,—

'Alice, there is nothing to be gained by referring to the past, nothing but pain. My past is dead and buried; the sooner you put yours under the ground the better. *Never* allude to our married life again. Let it be as though it had never been: it was a *fiasco*, a MISTAKE! We have only to deal with the present and the future.'

'The present and the future!' she echoed, choking back her tears.

The sound of their horses' hoofs on the soft springy turf was the only sound that broke the silence for more than ten minutes. Presently she said,—

'What is *your* future?—what are you going to do?'

'I mean to have a look at Looton, a winter's hunting in the shires, and to return to India in the spring.'

'To India!' she gasped. 'Reginald, does it ever, *ever* strike you how cruel you are to me?'

'Cruel!' he echoed, looking into her wistful beautiful eyes with stern self-command. 'God help you, Alice, if I was ever as cruel to you as you have been to me. Come,' he added, putting his horse into a canter, 'here is the lane to the Manister road; we had better get on.'

Somehow, Alice's attempts at explanation or reconcilation were always failures. Her husband declined to meet her halfway. He looked so cold and so unsympathetic that the words that came trembling to her lips died away unspoken, frozen into silence by the icy chilliness of his demeanour. Firm and intrepid resolutions she had made to brave him came to nothing when she found herself alone with him face to face. He would talk on any other topic but themselves—their past. He cantered up the lane in front of her without even turning his head. Had he glanced backwards, he would have seen what would have surprised him considerably—Alice hastily searching in the saddle-

pocket for her handkerchief and furtively wiping away some distinctly visible tears.

The long grass lane terminated in a locked gate—a gate opening on the Manister road—over which Cardigan showed the way in gallant style, closely followed by the bay and blue habit.

'Oh, how pretty! How easy it looks!' exclaimed Mary Ferrars, as she and Geoffrey trotted up just in time to witness the performance.

'It's not often you see a married couple ride like *that*,' returned Geoffrey complacently, 'and it's just the only subject on which they agree.'

They all rode into the town together, where they again divided—Geoffrey and Mary to go to the confectioner's—an errand for Maurice—Alice and Reginald to despatch a telegram. When they came to the post-office, two carriages were already drawn up, containing some of the Steepshire *monde*.

They favoured Alice and her cavalier with an impertinent stare, or looked over her head with fixed attention.

One old lady adjusted her *pince-nez*, and amused herself by staring Alice out of countenance.

When her husband had despatched the telegram he came out, and saw at a glance the contemptuous looks levelled at his wife, her burning cheeks and downcast eyes. In a second he grasped the situation, and turning on the carriages a look of scathing indignation, he mounted his horse, and, unintentionally ramming in the spurs, that fiery animal became almost unmanageable, and, rearing erect, nearly overbalanced into one of the landaus; but having regained his equilibrium, went plunging violently down the street.

'Who is the young man she has the effrontery to ride with?' asked the old lady with the glasses.

'Don't know, I'm sure. Looks like a cavalry man,' responded her daughter languidly. 'Better ask Smith.'

Mr Smith, postmaster, who was standing at his shop-door, looking after the equestrians, and briskly rubbing his hands, said, in reply to her question,—

'Certainly, ma'am, certainly,' clearing his throat and preparing to deliver what he knows will be a startling announcement. 'You mean the gentleman on the chesnut horse, just turning into Market Street?'

An eager nod of assent.

'That is Sir Reginald, Lady Fairfax's husband.'

'Impossible!'

'Well, ma'am, he has just sent off a telegram in that name.'

Sensation!

As the Monkswood party were leaving the town they encountered a very dashing victoria and pair, which stopped, and Alice was beckoned to by a sprightly dark-eyed lady with a rose-lined parasol.

'My *dear* Lady Fairfax, this is most *apropos!* I have been over to Monkswood to tell you that I won't take *any* refusal, but must insist on you and Miss Ferrars coming to my dance on Wednesday. You will stay and sleep, of course. The excuse you gave was most frivolous and ridiculous.'

'Many thanks, Lady Rufford. Let me introduce my husband, who has just returned from India.'

Lady Rufford received the dark *distingué*-looking gentleman who was presented to her with effusion, and plied him with questions more or less embarrassing. Before they parted it was agreed that they would all be present at her ball without fail.

Alice and Geoffrey dropped behind together, on the way home, exchanging lively sallies and critical observations.

'I say, Alice, doesn't it look as if Rex was getting up a strong flirtation with Miss Ferrars? What is he leaning over, and saying to her? Are you jealous?'

'Don't be absurd, Geoff!'

'I suppose you think Rex can't flirt, you pretty little confiding innocent! *Can't* he though! They used to say that when he did go in for it, which was seldom enough, he could give any fellow a week's start with a girl and cut him out after all.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' commencing to trot.

'Oh, you can please yourself about that. Remember you are warned. Come along, and let us interrupt their *tête-à-tête* before your domestic peace is wholly destroyed.'

Riding close up behind the other pair he sang—

'Will you walk a little faster?
Said a whiting to a snail,
There's a lobster close behind me,
And he's treading on my tail.'

'Miss Ferrars,' he continued, 'there's a glorious bit of turf; come and have a canter.'

This well-meant effort had no effect in readjusting the party; they all started together, and the ride was completed by a spirited neck-and-neck race between Alice and Geoffrey across the park.

The same evening, after dinner, it being a splendid moonlight night, they all strolled out about the pleasure-ground, except Miss Saville, who had too much regard for her rheumatic old bones. The French windows in the drawing-room opened on a terrace which led down by a flight of steps to a broad gravel-walk. Mary and Reginald had come in, and were standing just inside the open window. Alice and Geoffrey had lingered behind, quarrelling as usual. They could hear their fresh young voices coming up the walk in high argument. Reaching the steps, Alice sat down on the lowest and said,—

'Now, Geoff, a truce to nonsense. Be a good boy, and I'll tell your fortune with this daisy.'

'I'd much rather you would give me a kiss,' he

replied, stealing a black arm round her taper white waist.

Mary felt Reginald, who was standing close to her, wince. 'Ah, my friend,' she thought, 'you are not altogether so cold or indifferent as you seem!'

Alice, perfectly unconscious of the close proximity of her cousin's arm, went on,—

'He loves me—a little, very much, passionately; not at all, a little, very much. She loves you—*very much.* I was sure of it! The red-haired girl at Southsea. It's all very well to know the state of *her* affections, but you must not think of it. I would never give my consent—never, much less a wedding present.'

'I would a great deal rather have a kiss now, my pretty little cousin.'

'What on earth put kisses into your head, you ridiculous boy?'

'*You!*' said he, drawing her towards him and endeavouring to imprint a salute on her fair cheek.

But he reckoned without his hostess. Like lightning she sprang to her feet and confronted him with flaming cheeks and dilated eyes.

'How dare you forget yourself! How—how dare you insult me—me, a married woman? If you *had* kissed me I should have considered myself degraded indeed, and never spoken to you again as long as I lived.'

'Indeed!' sarcastically; 'what a loss!'

'What do you mean by such conduct, sir?' stamping her foot. Her breast was heaving, her hands trembling. She looked, and she was, in a towering passion.

'What a little cat you are! What a little fury! No *wonder* Rex had a rough time of it. What harm if I did kiss you, my own sweet-tempered first cousin?' said Geoffrey. 'I often kiss Dolly and Mary Saville—and why not you?'

'It would have been an outrage. No one ever has, ever shall kiss me, except—except—'she stammered.

'Except—how many? Don't be bashful.'

'Except Reginald, of course,' she replied, with passionate vehemence.

'What a good joke! You don't really say so?' he exclaimed, with a sneering laugh. 'By all accounts *he* has never had many of your kisses. He wouldn't be *bothered* with them,' proceeded this extremely aggravating youth. 'He would rather be leading a squadron of cavalry than kissing the prettiest girl in England; and he is not such a dog in the manger as to refuse me a few of what he never takes himself.'

'Let me pass, sir!' cried Alice, sweeping him aside and dashing up the steps, where she found herself face to face with her husband and Mary. 'Eavesdroppers!' she exclaimed, with a start.

'Quite unintentionally so,' replied Mary. 'And at any rate you have not committed yourself in any way.'

'More than you can say for Geoffrey!' cried Alice, giving him a glance of ineffable contempt as he leisurely ascended the steps, not the least disconcerted by the situation.

'He only meant it as a joke, or at least as a mark of cousinly affection,' said Reginald, who *had* Geoffrey succeeded in robbing Alice of a kiss, would have probably acted in a manner that would have surprised them both considerably. Fortunately, Geoffrey had been baffled, those pure sweet lips were still sacred to him; Alice was as loyal to him as he had been to her. The mere thought of this opened his heart to all the world, Geoffrey included.

'Forgive him this once,' Reginald said, 'and I'll be surety it never occurs again.'

'*You* take his part then?' she retorted hotly.

The more indignant she was the more her husband's spirits rose.

'Pardon me, I said nothing of taking anyone's

part; but I am quite certain that Geoffrey will never offend again.'

Seeing that Alice made no reply, and looked anything but appeased as she stood tapping one foot impatiently on the flags,—

'Shall I,' he continued, with one of his old and now very rare smiles, 'parade Geoffrey at twelve paces to-morrow on the tennis-ground? I'm afraid there will be some difficulty about weapons and seconds. My revolver and Maurice's pop-gun are the only pistols available. We might toss for the revolver—eh, Geoffrey?'

'Oh, of course, if you are going to treat the whole thing as a jest,' broke in Alice indignantly, 'there is no more to be said,' turning away to enter the house.

'Come, Alice,' interposed her husband more seriously, 'be sensible, be reasonable. Do you wish me to treat the matter as anything but a *joke?*' he asked, looking at her fixedly, and dropping his voice so as to be heard by her ear alone. Then resuming his former tone he went on, 'It would never do to allow such good friends to quarrel; permit me to patch up a truce, if not a lasting peace, between you and Geoffrey. Let me see you seal the reconciliation by shaking hands.'

'I shall *not* shake hands with him,' responded Alice, drawing herself up. 'Let him beg my pardon first,' putting her hands behind her and looking the picture of offended dignity.

'Here goes then,' returned Geoffrey, taking out his handkerchief and spreading it on the terrace with careful deliberation; then, dropping on it in a kneeling posture, with uplifted hands, he was commencing a long oration, in a whining tone.

'Go away—don't speak to me! You turn everything into ridicule,' cried Alice hotly.

'See how I am snubbed, Miss Ferrars,' he observed, rising, and dusting the knees of his trousers;

'all because I wanted to kiss my cousin! Where was the harm? Don't all your cousins kiss you?'

'I'm not bound to answer such an impertinent question,' replied Mary, laughing.

'Well, never mind. Suppose you take me for a nice little moonlight walk, and give me your confidence. I am afraid to stay here,' waving his handkerchief towards Alice.

In another moment they had descended the steps together, leaving Alice and her husband alone.

The former made an earnest effort for composure as she stood for some moments gazing out on the woods, which lay black and silver in the moonlight. Presently she turned and looked at her husband. He was leaning against the window-frame, the white background of which brought into bold relief the strength and symmetry of his figure. He was looking at her intently, with an amused smile on his lips.

A horrible thought that smile suggested to Alice's excited brain. He was laughing at her in his sleeve; he had told Geoffrey! The very idea made her giddy.

'Alice, I began to think you had forgotten how to fly into a passion. I see I was mistaken.'

'You were,' defiantly, measuring him from head to foot. 'I was mistaken also; I thought you were a gentleman.'

A momentary, almost imperceptible start, and then he replied coldly,—

'I thought so, too.'

'But you are not.' A dead silence. 'You know it is true.'

'Of course,' he replied icily, 'whatever you say is undeniable. Once you told me you despised and detested me; now I am no gentleman. So be it. You have no objection to smoking, as well as I can remember?'

Provoked beyond all bounds by his perfect *sang-froid*, she said,—

'Shall I tell you why you are no gentleman?'

'If it will not be giving you too much trouble,' carefully nursing a newly-lighted match.

'Because you have told Geoffrey. You heard what he said just now?'

'Told Geoffrey!' he exclaimed, in much amazement. 'Pray, explain yourself. You are speaking in riddles, as far as I'm concerned.'

'Told him about the other evening—before the races; it was too shameful. Oh, you might have spared me!' covering her face with her hands.

A dead silence. At last his answer came in a cold formal voice.

'If I had done what you imagine, I certainly would richly deserve to forfeit the name of gentleman. I am surprised that even you' (with scathing emphasis) 'should ask me to vindicate myself from such a charge. I have not told Geoffrey—strange as it may appear to you—and am sorry that after *all* you should have such a mean opinion of me still.'

Alice removed her hands, but averted her face as she said,—

'You did not tell him? Then what could he mean?'—hesitatingly.

'Am I responsible for Geoffrey's random remarks?' he asked sarcastically.

'No, no; of course not. Please forgive me, Reginald; I did you a great injustice!' looking at him with lovely deprecating eyes. 'Do?' she pleaded.

'You know very well, Alice,' he answered earnestly, 'that I could forgive you anything You have only to ask, and it is granted.'

'Surely,' he thought to himself, 'this is a broad hint with a vengeance.'

'A mere *façon de parler*,' said Alice to herself; 'a kind of Chinese compliment! Forgive any-

thing! A likely thing, when my one fault still remains a huge unerasable blot in his eyes.'

After a moment's silence she turned towards him with a pretty little shiver.

'Are you cold?' he asked formally. (Oh, why will she not seize this blessed opportunity?)

'No, not actually cold. I believe it's a goose walking over my grave—you know the tradition,' she answered, with a laugh. 'Well,' as he remained silent, 'if you are not going to say "Happy goose," like the young man in *Punch*, perhaps you will be so kind as to bring me my red shawl; it's on one of the chairs in the hall.'

So much for his hints and hopes.

Wrapped in the shawl, as a preventive against further shivering, Alice and her husband promenade up and down the terrace for nearly an hour, although it seemed to them no longer than a quarter of the time, talking of India chiefly. He told her about his regiment, his friends, his horses and dogs, his native servants, delighted to share his thoughts and experiences with her who was, in spite of everything, dearer to him than life itself. The interest she manifested made him talk of himself more freely than he had done for years, and then with her alone. To her eager questions about the Afghan campaign—his glories, his decorations, and his wounds—his answers were but brief and unsatisfactory; but he dwelt on the successes of his comrades-in-arms with generous and eloquent enthusiasm. And Alice, glad that he should talk to her as of old, on any subject, and hardly able to realise the present brief happy moment, lent a greedy ear to whatever narrative he was pleased to relate.

So absorbed were they that the other couple arrived at the foot of the steps unnoticed.

'Rex,' cried Geoffrey, 'is she cool? Is it safe for me to come up?'

'Quite safe. She accords you a free pardon.'

'Reginald!' she exclaimed, 'how *can* you say so?'

'You are bound to forgive him; I forgave that old lady for you the other day—you owe me a free pardon for Geoffrey.'

'Oh, but that was different. She—she—'

'She did not want to kiss him, did she?' put in Geoffrey the irrepressible. 'He never would have forgiven *that*, be sure!'

When the ladies had gone to bed, Reginald took a turn up and down the terrace, *solus:* 'I cannot make her out,' he said to himself, as he knocked the ashes off his cheroot. 'At times, such as this evening for instance, I could almost imagine that the past was a bad dream, nothing more. It's a curious thing that my own wife is the only woman who has ever puzzled me. One day she says we are to be strangers, the next friends; one day a cool shake hands, another a kiss. We spent an hour in a fool's paradise to-night—at any rate I did. I would be an idiot indeed if I took it for the real thing I seemed so sure of once—paradise without the fool.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

BAD NEWS.

THE next day was Sunday, and all the party went to church together in the open carriage. Alice, in a lovely white bonnet, a mass of ostrich feathers, sat opposite to Geoffrey, who, after carefully inspecting her, patronisingly remarked,—

'That is a most touching construction on your head, Alice, and *not* unbecoming. Have yourself painted for the next Academy, "Lady in a Bonnet."'

'How ridiculous! Fancy *me* in the Royal Academy!'

'Why not? Are you above it, like the old lady who said she would not mind being painted for the Academy, but would wait till she went to Rome and have herself done by one of *the old masters?*'

'I believe you spend your time making up these stories, Geoffrey. Here we are — now hand me down nicely; don't haul me out, as you generally do.'

'You wan't to show off your new boots; I know your vanity,' he retorted, as he sprang out.

The church being central was fuller than most country churches, and attended by many of the county families. As the Monkswood party walked up the aisle every eye was turned on them with unconcealed curiosity. With Lady Fairfax's appearance all were familiar; but which of these two young men was the roving husband? 'The elder of the two, of course; he was dark and bronzed, and looked like a soldier; the other was a youth.' *N.B.*—Geoffrey, although three-and-twenty, looked about nineteen.

The Fairfaxes formed a topic of discourse at many a luncheon table that day.

'Did you see Lady Fairfax in church, and her husband?' said one young lady.

'How do you know which was her husband, or if he was there at all?' replied her mother, who, with bonnet-strings thrown back, was making an ample meal. 'I don't believe he has come back one bit.'

'Oh, but he has,' persisted her daughter: 'their coachman told Brown; he arrived last Monday, and that was him sitting next the door.'

'Pray, how do you know?'

'Because he found the hymns for her and gave her a hassock.'

'Weighty reasons, certainly. It is much more

likely, from what you say, that he is *not* her husband. You never see your father finding my place or giving me a footstool,' returned the old lady, as she tossed off a glass of sherry and looked round as much as to say, 'This argument is a clincher.'

'Well, but when the offertory-bag came round I saw her get very red, as if she had forgotten her purse, and he slipped a sovereign into her hand.'

'And that's conclusive, you think?' said her mother.

'Pray, may I inquire how you saw all this by-play?' asked her brother.

'I was sitting right behind them, and made good use of my eyes, as usual—that's all.'

'Well,' responded the youth, pushing away his plate, 'I don't care who he is, but I should like to know who his tailor is. He was uncommonly well got up. I never saw a better-built coat,' he added, with fervour.

'I expect the block had something to say to it. It might not look so well on shoulders like a champagne-bottle,' returned his sister, looking at him amiably.

Leaving them to the impending battle, we return to Monkswood, and find our friends also at luncheon.

'What disgraceful singing! I never heard a less unanimous choir; everyone for himself, it seemed to me, time and tune being quite beneath notice,' remarked Geoffrey.

'It is splendid to what it used to be when I was a boy,' replied Sir Reginald; 'we had a kind of orchestra composed of a fiddle and a flute.'

'Did any of you see me?' asked Alice, appealing to the company. 'Every time I knelt down and leant forward, the jet fringe on the jacket of the lady in front, who would sit bolt upright, became entangled in the feathers of my bonnet. At one time it threatened to be quite serious. I was afraid

I should have had to have slipped off my bonnet and left it behind.'

'No, I did not remark you,' responded Geoffrey. 'But did you see the old buffer with the white waistcoat exactly under the pulpit? Miss Ferrars has taken such a fancy to him. She never took her eyes off him, and whispered to me during the sermon, that she "would rather be an old man's darling than a young man's slave."'

'Mr Saville, how can you?'

'*He* might not suit,' pursued Geoffrey unabashed, 'but I'll look out for another old gentleman for you, very old, very infirm, and very rich—the most tender and assiduous care during his lifetime guaranteed, *n'est-ce-pas?*'

'I have no intention of marrying at present; many thanks for your kind offer.'

'Well, perhaps you are right,' returned Geoffrey calmly. 'I myself am inclined to agree with the Frenchman who said, "Three weeks' paradise, thirty years' war;" married people always fight, either quietly at home, which is the most *deadly*, or publicly, which is the most amusing.'

'Really, Geoffrey,' said Miss Saville, 'with two married people present, it is hardly polite to air such opinions.'

'Oh,' replied this incorrigible young man, looking mischievously at Alice, 'if the cap does not fit them, they need not put it on.'

'Have some claret, Alice?' interrupted her husband, seeing that Geoffrey was in a teasing humour.'

'No, thank you.'

'Oh, but you will have to take it, my dear girl,' said her aunt; 'you know you were ordered it.'

'Was she?' exclaimed Sir Reginald, pouring out a glass and gently pushing it towards her.

'Oh, but I really cannot drink it. I hate it!' she urged.

'Then have some on your handkerchief,' said Geoffrey soothingly; 'like the man who became a teetotaller after indulging for years, and being asked to take some *real* "mountain-dew," reluctantly declined, but said, "Give me a drop on my handkerchief, it will do me good to *smell* it."'

'Hold out your handkerchief; it will be all the same as if you swallowed it.'

'Geoffrey, I declare I think you are quite off your head at times; is he not, Mary—or is it his Irish proclivities breaking out?' said Alice, waving away Geoffrey and the claret-jug.

'Don't *you* talk about Irish proclivities, ma'am; you have a strong suspicion of the blarney-stone yourself, and Irish eyes, and a real Irish temper.'

'Geoffrey, how *can* you say so?'

'Very easily. I often see you blarneying and wheedling that child of yours as only an Irishwoman can. I suppose you don't say, "Ah, won't you now, just to please mother?" And you coaxed and talked me out of that photo of—'

'Geoffrey, I declare, if you say another word, I'll never be friends with you again!' exclaimed Alice, half rising.

'Oh, all right, I'm dumb; but you *did*, you know; and I maintain that your Irishisms are as thick as the leaves in Vallambrosa. Why should the leaves be thicker *there* than anywhere else?' said he, standing up and looking round. 'Can anyone tell me? I thought not. Well, I'm off, not to study the leaves, but the *fruit* in the garden.'

. . . . . .

On Sunday evening, just as Alice was about to step into bed, and Mary was already sound asleep, the nurse came in to say, 'Master Maurice is very bad with croup, and such a time to have it, too—not a drop of ipecacuanha in the house since Mary the housemaid broke the bottle last week.' To hurry on her dressing-gown and run up to the

nursery took Alice less than two minutes. Maurice lay gasping in his cot. He was very ill indeed, as the nurse had said. He had never had such a bad attack before. His plaintive eyes, his poor, little, hot, clasping hands, his struggles for breath, drove Alice nearly wild.

The nurse said, 'I can't leave the child, ma'am. Will you go down and rouse Sir Reginald or Master Geoffrey, and send off for the doctor at once?'

Alice flew down the passage, and had gone some distance before she suddenly remembered that she did not know which was her husband's room, and he must be called up in preference to Geoffrey. She knew it was in the old wing, and that no one but himself slept there. Opening the swing-door into the dark, carpetless corridor, she tried the first room. Silence. She opened the door—all was dark and still; in the next equal blackness and stillness; at the third, her patience exhausted, she dispensed with a knock, turned the handle, and all but fell down the steps into a lighted room, large, low, and old-fashioned, bare of curtains and all luxuries. A small iron bed, some obsolete chairs and tables, a huge bookcase, and a couple of cabinets containing birds' nests and fossils, were ranged round the walls. Her husband was standing in the middle of the room with his coat off, winding up his watch. Shutting it with a sharp click, he viewed the apparition on the doorstep with unmeasured astonishment. His wife's white frightened face told him that something was amiss, as she stood before him pale and distracted.

'What is the matter?' he cried. 'Robbers! or is the house on fire?'

'Maurice is very ill. I want you to rouse up the men and send for the doctor.'

'Very well,' he replied, resuming his coat and

taking up his candle. 'I'll have a look at him first; perhaps he is not as bad as you imagine.'

He followed Alice to the nursery; and when he saw the state of the case he looked very grave indeed.

'Shall I go for the doctor myself, Alice?' he asked.

'No, sir, *do not*,' interposed the nurse significantly. 'You had much better stay here.'

Whilst he was below giving directions, Alice and the nurse administered a steaming hot bath to Maurice; but it was of no avail, his breathing was as laboured as ever. The nurse going downstairs, on an errand, met her master returning.

'Well, is he better?' he asked, eagerly.

'No, sir; but worse! How long will it be before the doctor comes?'

'An hour, at the least,' replied Sir Reginald.

'An hour's the very most he will last, poor lamb!'

'Is he so very bad as all *that?*' inquired her master, turning deadly pale.

'Very bad. He could not be worse! Will you please to stay with my lady whilst I am away—if anything do happen to the child, she'll go clean out of her mind, for certain—it's a terrible pity Mrs Mayhew is away; and Miss Saville is no more use than a child herself.'

'Shall I have her called? Surely she has some experience.'

'No, sir; the fewer people in the nursery the better; and I'm afraid that all the experience in the country could not save the child *now*—he's desperate bad.' So saying, this Job's comforter continued her way downstairs, leaving Sir Reginald to take her place with his wife. He stood for a moment to collect his thoughts, and then quickly ascended to the nursery, where he found the child on Alice's lap, fighting and gasping for breath—a

most heartrending sight. His mother, perfectly collected so far, but as white as marble, was soothing him with such soft endearments and caresses as only a mother knows.

When her husband entered, she raised her sweet, pathetic eyes to his, as if in mute entreaty for help for her child.

'I wish I knew something to suggest, Alice,' he said, coming over to the table, near which she was sitting; 'I am a capital nurse if it were typhoid fever or broken bones; but I know nothing about children. There is an old book on household medicine in the library, we might find some hints in it. Shall I fetch it?'

'Do, and don't be long,' she answered.

In a few minutes he had returned with the book, over which they pored together—the barrier between them was completely broken down for the time being by this common anxiety. Alice found herself ordering him hither and thither as if he were Geoffrey. None of the remedies suggested were of any use, as there was no medicine-chest in the house, and a mustard plaster and hot bath had been already tried in vain.

Reginald lifted the child from Alice's arms and laid him in his bed, saying that he would have more air.

Presently the nurse returned, and, standing at the foot of the cot, surveyed the little patient critically. Whilst Alice was bending over him, she approached her master and whispered in his ear,—

'It is all over with him; another fit like the last and he will choke; he can't live above a quarter of an hour.'

'In that case you had better leave me alone with Lady Fairfax; but bring the doctor the instant he comes.'

'But I'd better stay, sir; I had, indeed.'

'No—no,' he returned, impatiently, 'go—go at once. You can be of no use here.'

This whispered conversation was unnoticed by Alice, who was bending over Maurice, fanning him. With watch in hand, Sir Reginald stood at one side of the child, whilst his wife knelt at the other. Maurice seemed weaker and weaker.

Alice looked at her husband and read in his face that he shared her worst fears. Her child was dying. She leant over her boy in an agony of tearless grief.

'Oh, my darling Maurice!' she cried, almost frantically, 'don't die, don't leave me! you are all I have in the world!' looking at him with distracted eyes, and wringing her small thin hands. 'If you are taken I will go with you. I won't, no, I won't live without you!'

'Alice, Alice!' remonstrated her husband; 'think of what you are saying.'

Suddenly rising, she took the child up in her arms, and carried him to the window.

'At least he shall die in my arms,' she said. 'Yes, he shall!' she exclaimed excitedly.

'But he is not dying now,' said Sir Reginald. 'Give him to me for a little; he is much too heavy for you. Remember whilst there's life there's hope.'

'No—no—no! Do not take him from me for the little time he may be left. Oh, my own darling, how you are suffering! If I could only bear it for you; if I might only die in your stead!' she moaned, rocking the boy in her arms. 'How glad I am that they say I am so weak and delicate; I will soon follow you, my treasure.'

Sir Reginald, leaning against the window-shutter, listened to his half-distracted wife in silence.

'I know you think that I am wicked, that I am insane,' continued Alice; 'but if he dies I will die too; it will kill me.' And she turned on him a look akin to madness and despair.

'Alice, am I nothing to you, then?'

'You! You are only the shadow of my husband. No; you are nothing to me; you said so yourself,' she murmured, as she kissed her boy's hands convulsively.

'I know that I am nothing to you but the shadow of a husband. Deeply as you have injured me, what else could I be? But consider me now—for the next few hours at least—the husband I *would* have been to you, and let me comfort you, my dearest. If your child is taken, who can share your grief like me—his father? and if he is spared—as I sincerely trust he will be—who can so deeply feel the happiness of having him restored? His pulse is still pretty strong,' he added, taking the child's little hand in his. 'The doctor will be here in five minutes. Do not give up all hope yet, my poor Alice.'

'Oh, Reginald,' she said gratefully, 'you have lifted a little of the load off my heart; you have comforted me already.'

At this instant the door opened, and the doctor and nurse came into the room; the former bustled over to the side of Maurice's cot.

'Ah-h!' said he. He always prefaced his remarks with a long breath, as if he had just swallowed something delicious. 'I'm in time, after all, I see! Bring him here to the table, Lady Fairfax, and I'll give him a dose that will cure him in no time. Don't look so frightened, my dear young lady.'

White as her dressing-gown, her long hair hanging in a thick loose plait far below her waist, she rose and gave her boy into the doctor's hands. He administered a remedy that had an almost instantaneous effect, and, within a quarter of an hour, Maurice lay in his little cot sound asleep.

The doctor, an elderly, eccentric, and extremely clever man, after staring at Sir Reginald for some seconds, said brusquely,—

'And who is this young gentleman who has dropped the medicine so accurately and been so useful?'

'He is my husband, Dr Barton.'

'Ah-h! I thought so, from the likeness to the boy; but you told me your husband was in India! By what conjuring trick is he here to-night?'

'No conjuring trick beyond a medical board,' replied Sir Reginald coolly.

'Ah-h! Well, as you *are* here, Sir Reginald, I want to speak to you. The child is all right, there is not the slightest fear of him—a bad attack of croup; but I've pulled children through worse often. That idiot of a nurse, to swell her own importance, seems to have frightened Lady Fairfax nearly into fits. I never thought much of that nurse—never; I often told you so,' nodding solemnly at Alice. 'Well, we may as well go downstairs, Sir Reginald. Good-night, Lady Fairfax; good-night, and go to bed.'

Together they descended to the library. The doctor, having usurped the rug and refreshed himself with some spirits and water, said abruptly,—

'I want particularly to speak to you, Sir Reginald, now you *are* here, about your wife. The boy is all right; he will live to plague you for many a year; he is as strong as a pony; there's no fear of *him*.'

'Do you mean,' said Sir Reginald, fixing on him an eye piercing as an eagle's, 'that there *is* fear of my wife?'

'I do,' he replied emphatically; 'and I think it my duty to tell you so, now you *are* here. That you set off to India and left a delicate girl of seventeen mopping here alone is your concern, of course!'

'Of course,' repeated his host, reddening with anger.

Dr Barton eyed the young man standing before

him with a resentful glance from under his bushy, luxuriant grey eyebrows.

('He looks overbearing, harsh, and cold. I've no doubt he treats her as he treats his troopers; I'll not spare him then.') 'Your wife,' clearing his throat and speaking slowly, 'will probably leave you a widower ere long. She comes of a delicate stock, and, as far as I can observe, is rapidly following in her mother's footsteps.'

Seeing that this thrust told, he continued,—

'She is subject to deadly fainting fits, and might go off in one of them any day.'

A dead silence followed this remark, during which the doctor, after glaring at Sir Reginald over the edge of his tumbler, swallowed the remainder of his whisky and water, and, buttoning up his coat and taking his hat, briskly prepared to depart.

Sir Reginald's dry lips refused to speak; large drops of perspiration stood like beads on his brow; the veins in his hand, where he was grasping the back of a chair, resembled thick cords.

'Ah,' thought the doctor complacently, 'he does care. However, he had no business to leave her,' he said to himself, as he feasted his eye on his victim, with an air of tranquil enjoyment.

'She may,' he proceeded aloud, 'come round with care and indulgence of every kind; she must never be crossed, thwarted, or agitated, and always have her own way. (Looks as if he liked his own way.) I'll come round in a day or two and see how she is going on. Good-bye.'

'Wait a second,' said Sir Reginald vehemently, detaining him with one hand; 'you cannot go like this. If my wife is so seriously ill, you must leave me some more fixed directions.'

'She is not actually ill, only threatened with illness. As for directions, I say watch her and guard her as the very apple of your eye. She

nearly died when that child was born, as I daresay you know. A sudden chill, a bad cold, would carry her off; she has no stamina.' *Exit.*

'What a night this has been!' thought Sir Reginald, looking at the clock wearily; 'first I am told that the child is dying, now my wife.'

He drew a chair to the table, and, leaning his elbows on it, buried his face in his hands.

'Anything but *this*,' he said to himself; 'after all I have gone through, can *this* be coming?'

For more than a quarter of an hour he remained in the same attitude, wrestling with the bitterest anguish he had ever known. The door, which was ajar, was softly pushed open and Alice came in.

'Well,' she said, 'what does he say? Is it all right?'

Then, catching sight of her husband's face, she seized his arm.

'Tell me the worst at once,' she gasped, steadying herself by her other hand on the back of his chair. 'Don't hide it from me, for God's sake!'

'There is nothing to be told,' he replied, making a valiant effort to speak and look as usual. 'Maurice was not nearly as ill as we imagined; he will be all right to-morrow. I assure you there is no cause for alarm,' he added earnestly, 'none whatever.'

'You are sure? You are not saying this out of mistaken kindness? It is true?'

'Quite true,' he repeated, pushing back his chair and standing up.

Alice gazed fixedly at her husband; he was deathly pale, and had a half-stunned look, and surely when she first saw him his thick black lashes were *wet*.

'Then what was the matter with you just now?' she inquired. 'Won't you tell me? Won't you let me share your trouble after all you said to-night?'

'I can't. At least not now,' he stammered.

'Why not now?' she exclaimed. 'It must be some very bad news, I know, for you look even more sorry than when we thought Maurice was dying; and yet it *cannot* be anything worse than that! Let me help you to bear it, whatever it is; do, my dear Regy?'

'Never allude to the subject again, Alice, unless you wish to drive me frantic. You could not share this trouble with me; no one could. Perhaps some day I may tell you, not now. You must go to bed at once; it is past two o'clock,' he added authoritatively.

'No, no,' she replied firmly; 'I am going to sit up with Maurice.'

'Indeed, you will do nothing of the kind; I will stay with him if it is necessary; but you are to go to bed this instant,' he replied, in a tone that effectually repelled argument. And in spite of all Alice could say she was obliged to obey, and, very reluctantly, retired.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TRAVELLER'S TALES.

MAURICE, with a broad piece of flannel round his throat, appeared at breakfast next morning as well as ever; and Alice, pale and languid, took her place before the teapot as usual. She observed a change in her husband. On other mornings he disappeared after breakfast, and was never seen till luncheon, excusing himself on the plea of business with the bailiff; and, in fact, unless absolutely obliged to ride or play lawn-tennis, they saw nothing of him all day.

Alice had reason to know that many of his spare hours were spent with Maurice. More than once

she had come across the pair in the park, Maurice riding Tweedle Dum, his father holding the bridle and relating long and thrilling fairy tales—accounts of dwarfs, giants, and fairy princesses with golden hair; or they would be discovered on the edge of a pond, sailing boats, or under the lee of a hay-cock, sharing a leaf of strawberries. Maurice idolised his father, and Alice could see that she no longer had the first and only place in his affections. She felt no twinge of jealousy as she made this discovery; she was very ready to share his heart with Reginald.

This particular morning her husband did not vanish as usual the instant breakfast was over. He loitered about the grounds with the ladies, made suggestions about the garden, and gave them a lesson in budding roses.

He distinctly put a veto on lawn-tennis as far as Alice was concerned, but he fetched a chair, a book, and a shawl, and established her under a tree, where she could look on. She caught his eyes fixed on her more than once with a look of anxiety and concern in their dark depths that puzzled her extremely.

What did this change mean? Could he be going to forgive her after all? Her colour and her spirits rose at the thought; a little happiness goes a long way at twenty. Revived by a whole morning's rest, she was meditating a move, when Geoffrey, with a broad smirk on his face and a fat frog in his handkerchief, lounged up to her.

'Here,' said he, 'is the frog who would a-wooing go;' and, he added, as he uncovered the treasure, 'he is come to pay his addresses to you, Alice,' making a feint of putting him in her lap.

'That he is not,' she cried, jumping up and dodging Geoffrey round a tree. Round and round they went like a pair of squirrels, Mary and Reginald gravely looking on.

'Did you ever see such a pair of children?' exclaimed Mary. 'That's the way Alice used to go on before she was married. She had such wild spirits; she was the life of us all at Rougemont. I would never have known her to be the same person; she is so changed,' she observed, with a reproachful glance at Reginald.

'I see you blame me for it all, Miss Ferrars; but Alice has only herself to thank, no one else. You would say that I was changed too if you had known me three years ago, before this unfortunate separation between us. Alice has told you all about it, of course?' he asked, with conviction.

'No, not one word.'

'Do you mean to say that, living together in such close intimacy—sharing the same room, and no doubt sitting up half the night talking, as young ladies do—she has never made you her confidante?'

'Not with regard to you. On any other subject she is as open as the day, but her married life she never alludes to; and well as I know her and love her—childish and young as she is—she is the last person into whose confidence I would thrust myself uninvited.'

Just at this instant Alice, who had hitherto eluded Geoffrey, came running up exhausted and out of breath with laughing.

'Save me, Mary, save me!' she cried, stretching out both hands, and at the same time catching her foot in the tennis-rope she would have measured her length on the sward, had not her husband stepped forward and caught her in his arms. It was altogether accidental, and only for a second that he held her, but Alice became crimson.

'I cannot allow any more of this kind of thing,' he said, coolly picking up his tennis-bat. 'Helen will be back this afternoon, and I am sure she will not hear of your going to the ball to-morrow if you knock yourself up to-day. I am going into Manister

now, and I leave you in Miss Ferrars' charge. I see Cardigan waiting, and as I have to change my clothes, I must be off.'

'By-the-way, Rex, before you go I want you to tell me something,' said Geoffrey, with an air of unusual solemnity.

'Yes?' responded Reginald, turning back and looking at him gravely. 'Look sharp, then, for I'm in a hurry.'

'You have been brought up amongst horses since you were the size of Maurice, and ought to know all about them, both from a civil and military point of view—'

'Well, what is it?' impatiently.

'On which side of a horse does the most hair grow?'

'The side the mane is on.'

'No; try again.'

'The off-side!—the near side?'

'No. Give it up?'

'Yes, of course I do.'

'The *outside!* Good riddle, isn't it?'

'No. Your own, I presume. I have no time to waste listening to such nonsense. Now, mind you don't encourage Alice in running about and tiring herself,' he concluded, as with a glance at his wife he walked rapidly away.

'What does he mean?' asked Geoffrey, with raised brows and an air of veiled derision; 'one would think you were made of sugar! I suppose he is going into Manister to buy a glass case to keep you in! You don't mean to tell me you are about to set up as a young lady who faints and goes into hysterics, or a delicate creature with nerves? If you are, I've done with you!'

'Do not be alarmed; I think I shall reassure you at luncheon. I have the appetite of a ploughman, and I am yearning for the gong,' replied Alice, as, shouldering her parasol, she

turned towards the house, followed by her two friends.

Helen arrived the same afternoon and related her adventures and news at five-o'clock tea. She also delivered a short but severe lecture to Alice for having taken a long ride, and looking pale, heavy-eyed, and tired. In spite of Alice's indignant denial she could not conceal from herself that she *was* very tired as she entered the drawing-room just before dinner and wearily seated herself in one of the windows. The only other occupant of the room was her husband, ensconced in an easy-chair and almost concealed by a large newspaper. She recognised him, however, by the slim brown hand that firmly grasped *The Standard*. He did not take any notice of her entrance. 'He never did,' she thought, with a sharp pang as she leant her head listlessly against the window-sash and looked out. Suddenly the grass appeared to heave, earth and sky seemed confusedly mixed. She turned her head, the room was swimming round and round; she was going to faint. She rose to escape to her own room whilst there was yet time, but it was too late; she tottered, grasped blindly at a chair; somebody, tall and strong, took her in his arms, and she remembered no more. Reginald had been surreptitiously glancing at Alice for some minutes. Her dejected attitude, the weary, pathetic pose of her haughty little head struck him painfully. How white, how awfully white she was! Was she going to faint? She was; he saw her rise unsteadily and try to speak. In an instant he was beside her, and saved her from a fall for the second time that day. Very, very tenderly he carried her over and laid her on a couch. How light and fragile was his burden—she seemed like a child in his arms! She looked deathlike as he laid her down. He had never seen a woman faint before, and was at his wits' end to know what to

do. To leave her was impossible; he dare not. He rang the bell madly and returned to his post. As he thought of the doctor's words the previous evening his heart stood still with horror. She looked so cold, so marble-like, so utterly inanimate, —could she be dead? He took up one of her small limp hands and felt her pulse. As he was doing so, Helen and Mary, to his great relief, came into the room.

'Ah, I'm not one bit surprised,' said the former composedly. 'Run for my salts, Mary. Fetch a glass of water and a fan, Regy. She will come round presently.'

Her quiet matter-of-fact manner relieved him at once. Mary's mind was set at rest now and for ever on one subject—Sir Reginald did care for Alice after all—loved her as a man like him could love.

One glance at him had been sufficient. Even now, though reassured by Helen, his face was ashy white, and the hand that held the tumbler of water shook visibly. By this time they were joined by Mark and Geoffrey. Alice had revived; she sat up, looking very pale and dazed, and announced 'that she was all right and going in to dinner, and really did not know how she could have been so stupid.'

She was quickly suppressed by Helen, who said,—

'No, my dear, no dinner for you; you are going to bed, and Regy will carry you upstairs.'

'Indeed, he shall not!' cried Alice, a faint tinge of pink coming into her cheeks, and starting up as though to leave the sofa. 'No, no,' she added, glancing nervously at her husband; his grave, anxious face touched her and surprised her.

'Will you let Mark carry you?' said Helen soothingly. 'He has had plenty of practice with me, and he won't drop you.'

'No, ten thousand times; why should anyone carry me? I've not lost the use of my limbs; I am quite capable of walking upstairs. I shall stay here for the present, whilst you all go to dinner. Pray go! Please go. Don't mind me. Helen will tell you,' addressing her husband, 'that it is nothing—nothing at all. Why, at one time I used to faint regularly every day—I got quite into the habit of it,' with a reassuring smile. 'There is the gong. You really make me very uncomfortable all of you, staring at me like this. Go,' she added, waving them away, 'go to dinner.'

Thus eagerly adjured they trooped off, with the exception of Helen. Mary observed that one person barely touched a morsel of food, and that was Reginald. He was silent and preoccupied, and answered at random when addressed.

Towards the middle of the meal Helen came sailing into the room, prepared to make up for lost time as she briskly unfolded her napkin.

'You may make your mind quite easy, Regy,' she said. 'Alice will be all right to-morrow. She was only worn out, poor child, and has gone to bed, and is, I daresay, already asleep. How frightened you did look! What would have become of you if you had seen her when she was really ill, and her life hung by a thread from hour to hour?' she added, between two spoonsful of soup.

'How do you know I was frightened?'

'Your face spoke volumes, my dear boy; you were as white as this tablecloth.'

'Is that how you look when you go into action, Regy?' asked Geoffrey, looking up from his plate.

'Scarcely, I hope, or I would be a sorry example to the men.'

'Tell me, Rex, did you ever know what it was to be in a regular blue funk?'

'I can't honestly say I ever was on my own account—probably it's a treat in store for me—but

I have felt fears for others that have made my heart stand still more than once. The sensation must be the same as abject personal fear—in other words, a blue funk.'

'Well, I don't understand; explain yourself.'

'For instance, when I saw a gun and four horses suddenly back over the edge of a pass, and ultimately go over, in spite of the horses' frantic exertions—a fall of two thousand feet, I trembled for the gunners.'

'So I should imagine.'

'Fortunately they flung themselves off in time.'

'Poor horses! what a horrible sight!' said Mary Ferrars. 'I daresay you have seen a good many such.'

'Yes, I am sorry to say I have. For instance, I have seen a horse's head taken clean off with a shell.'

'Don't, Reginald!' exclaimed Helen; 'you are making me perfectly sick.'

'Well then, I won't; I'll spare you the rest of my experiences. You want to know, Geoff, what I mean by "fearing for others"? Now, for instance, if old Fordyce gets the regiment, I tremble for *you*. He has seen the superb caricature you drew of him, nearly all nose; and he strongly suspects that you are the "party" that painted old Blowhard, his favourite white charger, a dazzling shepherd's-plaid. I shudder when I think of *your* fate, my young friend.'

'Stuff, rubbish, nonsense!' exclaimed Geoffrey contemptuously. 'Do you know what *I* heard the other day? But I need hardly say that I did not believe it: that you, Reginald Fairfax—"Fighting Fairfax," as they call you—keep the young fry of the Seventeenth in glorious order. "Set a thief to catch a thief," I said. The benighted youths look upon you as a happy blending of Bayard and Sir Galahad. I assured my informant that "Still waters run deep" was a proverb made expressly to fit you, and that they little knew you.'

'Much obliged,' replied Reginald, stroking his moustache to conceal a smile. 'We have a very nice set of boys in the Seventeenth, and you might do worse than exchange. I'll see that they don't bully you, and do what I can to smarten you up.'

'Thanks for your noble offer, but the Fifth could not afford to lose me. As to smartening me up, it would be impossible; it would be painting the lily. Don't you think so, Miss Ferrars? Don't you think I'm a very smart-looking young fellow? —just as efficient, if not actually as bloodthirsty, as our host, who revelled in the name of "Shaitan" whilst in Afghanistan? It was a pretty little nickname given him by the tribes. You can guess what it means,' nodding across the table mysteriously.

'Enough of these mutual compliments!' exclaimed Helen. 'It was not Reginald himself, but his *horse* that was called "Shaitan," my good Geoffrey, and the Afghans had something else to do than find nicknames for British officers.'

'By the way, Rex,' remarked Geoffrey, leaning back in his chair, adjusting his eyeglass, and evidently stretching his long legs still further under the mahogany, with the air of a man who has dined to his satisfaction, 'what's your opinion of the native of that part of the world, candidly and impartially?'

'If you mean the Afridi of the period, my candid, impartial opinion of him is that he is a dirty-looking ruffian, who would rob his own mother, and cut his father's throat for the sake of two rupees.'

'Inhuman monster!' ejaculated Helen tragically.

'One old fellow told me *himself* that there was nothing in life so pleasant as sitting on the roof of one's house, and shooting at the wayfarers who came to drink at the well. He dwelt on the subject with such pleasure, that I have no doubt that he looked back on it as one of his happiest experiences.'

'Old brute!' muttered Geoffrey. '*How* I should have enjoyed a pot-shot at *him!* What sort of shots were they, take them all in all?'

'Not bad, considering their weapons and ammunition; a long Jazail studded with brass, and rams' horns full of very doubtful powder. They are no use at a snap-shot, or in the open; but give them *lots* of time to aim, and good cover behind a bit of rock, and they generally pick off a fair share of stragglers. The first night we camped beyond Ali Musjid, we chose a bad place, a hollow, and the light attracted swarms all round us. The bullets went everywhere, and the firing resembled nothing on earth so much as a hot corner at a big battue.'

'Awfully pleasant for all you fellows!' ejaculated Geoffrey.

'We had only two casualties, strange to say, though some of the tents were riddled. I need scarcely remark that we were more careful about the site of our next camp.'

'No doubt you made yourselves very secure and luxurious when you were permanently fixed at Dabaule?' inquired Helen.

'Comparatively speaking, I suppose we were more secure, although Vaughan caught an Afridi in his tent one night. He heard a noise, and putting out his hand to get hold of a revolver, he caught the bare, shaven head of one of these beggars. He gave the alarm, and some of us rushed in and found him struggling with a powerful fellow, with the fiend's own expression, and a knife between his teeth. We made an example of him next day as a warning to others. But it was of precious little use; they slaughtered our unfortunate grass-cutters and syces in the most barbarous way, and sent us in our regimental barber with both hands cut off. He did not seem to mind *that* so much as eighty rupees they had robbed him of, and he was utterly

heart-broken about them—his savings, his little all. So I promised to make up the money if he got well; and, strange to say, he made a most wonderfully rapid recovery, and seems to get on capitally with his two bare stumps.'

'Poor creature!' exclaimed Helen.

'How horrible!' cried Miss Ferrars.

'I suppose it was all open country!' remarked Geoffrey; 'no roads, and like a bleak sort of common, I always fancy it; with a few hills and lots of stones and rocks.'

'That was the case in some places, but in others we had, after a while, a capital road, especially by the Kyber line, thanks to the sappers! And some wag in one place put up a finger-post with "Madras to Cabul" painted on it in large letters; and the road itself was as good as you need wish to see; but in many parts we had no road at all, and it was terrible work for the artillery, especially when the country was cut up with lots of watercourses.'

'By-the-bye, Rex,' said Helen, helping herself to her second peach, 'how were you off for food?'

'Very badly, indeed, sometimes; and I assure you that I now know what *hunger* means, from downright practical experience.'

'Why, you had your rations and your mess!' cried Geoffrey.

'A pound of meat a day for a hungry man who spends, perhaps, twelve hours in the saddle, with a bitter bleak wind to sharpen his appetite, was not much to boast of; and sometimes the ration was bad, or bone. When we had our permanent camp we fared well enough, and had a stew—a big pot into which everything was thrown—game, rations, goat, etc.; and as the pot was always kept going, it had a rich miscellaneous flavour, difficult to describe, but most excellent.'

'Do you mean that it was not made afresh every day?' asked Miss Ferrars, a fair amateur cook.

'Every day something fresh was added, but the original stew was about three months old. Never cleared out, that was the beauty of it.'

'O-oh!' cried Helen, 'how could you! how can you?'

'It was most superior, I assure you; our *pot-au-feu* was noted, I can tell you, Helen.'

'That will do. No more traveller's tales for *me*, Rex'—rising,—'I'm going to see if Alice is asleep.'

As the door closed on the disgusted matron, Reginald said,—

'Helen may turn up her nose at our stew, but if she had been one week in camp, she would have appreciated it just as keenly as the most ravenous among us.'

'Had you a mess-tent?' asked Geoffrey solicitously.

'Yes, a kind of one, when we were fixtures; nothing very luxurious, I need scarcely say, and little or no mess-kit. It was a sight, once seen never forgotten, to witness our fellows going to dinner; various figures in greatcoats and comforters solemnly approaching, and each bearing in his hand his own drinking-cup, and plate, and knife and fork. We lived in Spartan simplicity, I can assure you.'

'And how did you like it?' inquired Miss Ferrars.

'To be frank with you, not much,' returned her host candidly. 'The cold was simply awful—bad enough for us who come from a coldish climate, but for our poor camp-followers and syces, natives of the broiling plains, it was, in many cases, death. I could not say how many camel-drivers and grass-cutters have been found frozen in their sleep.'

'But they had warm clothes,' said Mr Mayhew, with the air of asserting an unanswerable fact.

'Yes; such as they were. A kind of blanket suit made to fit the million. And then you saw tall

men in clothes barely below their miserable knees, and little men shambling along, one huge wrinkle. These garments were better than nothing,—that's all.'

'And did you feel the cold yourself?' asked Mark, with sympathetic interest.

'Sometimes; but I am a hardy fellow, and could stand it better than lots of others. Duck-shooting of a winter's day, at home, broke me in pretty well, you know.'

'And was your appetite equally well broken in?' asked Geoffrey, with raised eyebrows.

'I'm afraid not,' returned Reginald, with a laugh. 'Many a time I have gone to bed hungry.'

'But you could always buy?' said Geoffrey combatively.

'Not always. When the surrounding country was nothing but stones and brown grass, and there was no bazaar, no mess, nothing but our strictly allotted ration, I declare I've sometimes envied my chargers, who were pretty well off for hay. But of course these short commons were the exception, not the rule,' he added cheerfully.

Mary gazed with blank, open-eyed amazement at her neighbour, and tried to realise that this nonchalant, handsome host of hers, who seemed to consider it rather an exertion to break a few walnuts, who was surrounded by every luxury taste could devise or money could obtain, had been quite recently a cold, hungry soldier, garbed in a sheepskin coat; had confronted hardship and war, and had ridden up undaunted and looked into the very face of death itself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BALL AT RUFFORD.

THE evening of the ball found Alice arraying herself at her cheval glass, an admiring Abigail was twitching and pulling at her dress—she also admired herself in no small degree. The glass reflected an exquisitely-fitting white silk ball costume, trimmed with clouds of soft lace, tulle, and silver—it was not merely a dress, it was an inspiration. A thick collar of diamonds encircled her throat—Reginald's wedding present; three diamond stars to correspond sparkled in her hair; silver and diamond bangles, long white gloves, and a feather fan, completed her toilet.

Mary, in pale pink (her particular colour), looked remarkably well; but Alice *killed* her; no one would look at her twice beside such a dazzling vision of loveliness.

Together they descended to the hall, and found Mr and Mrs Mayhew, Geoffrey, and Reginald awaiting them, the two latter in the full splendour of their hussar uniform. Maurice, who had been allowed to sit up for once, seemed duly to appreciate the great occasion, and viewed his father with profound and unmistakable admiration; even the radiant apparition in white that came floating down the staircase was powerless to divert his attention.

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After an eight-mile drive the Monkswood party found themselves at the scene of action, and amidst a throng of carriages and blaze of lights descended at the entrance.

'We shall have to sort ourselves now,' remarked Geoffrey, as he sprang out with the bound of a kangaroo. 'You and Alice, Regy—Miss Ferrars and I will follow—lead the way.'

On a table in the entrance-hall lay heaps of gilded programmes. Sir Reginald picked up two as he passed, and, handing one to his wife, said carelessly,—

'You will give me a dance, Alice; won't you?'

'Certainly,' she replied, secretly much surprised at the request. 'I have promised Geoffrey the second valse; what will you have?'

'The valse after supper, when the room is not so crowded. There seem to be hundreds here,' glancing through the ballroom. 'Let me see,' taking her programme and looking at it for an instant; 'Number fourteen, "Brises des Nuits," I'll take that, thanks,' scribbling his initials and handing back her card. 'We had better move on now, the door is no longer blocked.'

They at last succeeded in making their way to Lady Rufford, who received them with much *empressement;* and Alice, after exchanging a few words with her hostess, was eagerly engaged for the ensuing lancers by a little Russian prince, who had clamorously begged for an introduction.

It is almost needless to describe a large ball in a country house; there is a strong family likeness among them, one is very much like another. A good floor, good supper, Liddell's band, and flowers in all directions constitute the chief features. The house party, the *élite* of the county, formed some portion of those present. There were pretty country girls, with rather *outré* dresses; there were stylish young ladies, who went to town every season, and wore unimpeachable frocks, to these a ball was a very ordinary affair; there were young men, bored and *blasé*, lounging against doors and walls, and looking superior to the whole thing; rustic sons of neighbouring squires, uncouth and unpolished, enjoying themselves hugely in elephantine gambols with the partners of their choice. There were the chaperons

—already languishing for supper, a large military contingent, and an immense number of outsiders, to whom this ball was the great social event of the year. The rooms were crowded; the reception-room, tearoom, and ballroom were almost impassable, not to speak of the staircase and all the nooks and corners that were crammed.

Alice and Reginald were personally but little known, and they overheard various remarks about themselves of a highly laudatory character. For instance, during a pause in a valse, Reginald's lively partner, who was freely discussing the dancers, exclaimed,—

'Do look at that girl in white, just opposite. There, standing next the pillar. How she and that boy are enjoying themselves! They seem too intimate for you to call it a flirtation, and not sufficiently tender for an engaged couple. Who can they be? I have never seen them before.'

Seeing her partner smile, she added,—

'Ah, I believe you know them!'

'I do,' he calmly replied. 'The boy, who would be extremely indignant if he heard you call him one, is Mr Saville, of the Fifth Hussars; and the young lady with him is his cousin, and my wife.'

'Your wife! you don't say so? You are joking! Is that really Lady Fairfax? She looks so preposterously young, I could easily imagine this to be her first ball.'

'Nevertheless, she has been married for more than three years.'

'She is uncommonly pretty,' returned the young lady, gazing at her with all her eyes. 'Several people have asked me who she was, but I did not know. She is quite the belle of the evening. Don't you think so?'

'I always agree with a lady, especially when it

is a question of taste,' was his evasive answer. 'Shall we take another turn?'

'Not very *enthusiastic* about his wife,' was his partner's mental observation as they once more joined the dancers.

'Who is the lovely girl in white?' was a question that half the room were asking each other. Alice is at last obtaining a *social success*, dozens of partners vainly beg for dances. She is turning the heads of all the young men, and filling the breasts of her own sex with the devouring flame of envy.

Supper was served at round tables accommodating ten or twelve. Sir Reginald and his partner had taken their places at one at which he was a stranger to all the other guests. A fat red-faced man, who was voraciously gobbling down lobster-salad, remarked to his neighbours,—

'Capital ball! capital supper!'

'Yes,' replied a bored-looking youth, with a patronising drawl, 'good floor, lots of pretty girls.'

'Ah!' added a third, helping himself to ham, 'but there is no one that comes within the length of a street of that girl in white, Lady Fairfax.'

'Quite agree with you,' responded the bored one, in a tone of deep approval.

'Could not get a dance, though,' said another; 'card crammed.'

'But,' pleaded his partner, a young person with a figure and dress resembling a pink-and-white pin-cushion, 'although she is quite too lovely, she has a melancholy expression when her face is in repose. I admire a more *riant* style. I think Miss Gordon is more taking, though not so strictly pretty.'

'I think so too,' said another lady; 'Miss Gordon is *my* beauty.'

'You are welcome to her, ladies,' responded the red-faced squire; 'none of the gentlemen will dispute her with you—we are all sworn admirers of

Lady Fairfax. She's like a princess—a fairy princess. Let's drink her health,' seizing a magnum of champagne and suiting the action to the word, having already supped 'not wisely, but too well.'

Reginald, much disgusted, was tied to this particular table by his partner's wants—the demands of a locust-like appetite..

'Never so tiresome or so hungry a girl,' he thought, as he replenished her plate time after time.

'What fun it is to hear them discussing your wife,' she whispered; 'you should get up and return thanks. How taken aback they would look.'

'I don't think I will disturb their equanimity so cruelly,' he returned. 'But if you have *quite* finished, we will adjourn. The next dance has commenced, and your partner is sure to be anathematising me.'

As he rose and left the table, someone said,—

'Who is the young hussar fellow with the V.C. and the scowl?'

'Walking down the room with the girl in green?' answered a quiet-looking man, who had taken the vacant place, and was critically scanning the *menu*.

'Yes, the same.'

'Oh, that's Fairfax.' (Sensation at the supper-table.)

Sir Reginald having recovered his liberty, was on his way to seek for a fresh partner, when he came face to face with one of the Twenty-Ninth who had been his host at Cheetapore. After a few brief expressions of pleasure and astonishment, the dragoon asked the hussar where he was staying, etc.

'I hope I shall have the pleasure of being presented to your wife. She is here, is she not?'

'Yes, but she is dancing at present.'

'Point her out, please; I am most anxious to see her.'

'Coming this way, in the white dress, dancing with the Highlander.'

'Jove!' ejaculated the dragoon, when she had passed. An enormous amount of admiration was compressed into that one syllable.

'You are a lucky fellow,' he added, surveying his companion enviously. 'If I could get a wife like that, I'd marry to-morrow. Has she a sister?'

'No.'

'Has she a cousin with a family likeness?'

'Don't be a fool, Carew,' replied Sir Reginald impatiently.

'I'm perfectly serious. There, she is sitting down now,' seizing his friend by the arm; 'come along and introduce me.'

But ere they reached the ottoman another partner had claimed Alice and carried her away.

'Never mind,' said Sir Reginald consolingly, 'come over to-morrow and dine and sleep. That will be a much better opportunity for making my wife's acquaintance.'

Meantime Alice had been enjoying herself excessively. She was very fond of dancing; the floor and the music were all that could be desired, and she had had a succession of good partners. Her spirits, as Geoffrey remarked to her, were quite up to concert-pitch, and she was spending a very pleasant evening.

'So was Reginald,' she thought, as she observed him dancing every dance, and selecting with much discrimination the prettiest girls in the room! At length her waltz, number fourteen, came round. She had been in to supper with a young lord, who, anxious to retain the belle of the evening on his arm as long as possible, was parading slowly up and down, entreating her for 'one more dance.'

'But I really cannot give you one; I have already put down four extra dances that are not on the card.'

'Let me look at your programme, if you don't mind,' he asked, with cool superiority.

She handed it to him unhesitatingly.

Yes, every dance was full!

'Who is this fellow, R. M. F., who has got himself down for the next? Can't you throw him over—forget all about it—and give it to a very deserving young man instead?'

'How do you know that the other is not a very deserving young man also?' she asked, with a smile.

'Who is he? He did not even give you his valuable autograph! Maybe he is not very keen about dancing—ten to one he is at supper! Who is he?' he repeated pertinaciously.

'He is my husband, since you insist on knowing.'

'Your husband—' with an impatient gesture, 'oh, come then, that's all right. The laws of society don't permit married people to dance together. I never heard of such a thing. You'll give *me* the dance, won't you?' he added, with tranquil confidence.

'No, certainly not!' she replied quietly.

'But if he forgets all about it, as he is sure to do—what then?'

'Your inference is not very flattering. But in that "case unprecedented" you may have the dance with pleasure,' rejoined Alice, with a smile.

'You are not a *bride*, are you?' he asked anxiously, after a moment's silence.

'Oh no; I've been married more than three years,' she returned, with some dignity.

'And may I ask if you always dance with your husband at balls?'

'Never, as yet, since we have been married,' she replied, looking down and surveying the toe of her slender satin shoe with critical inspection.

'Well, mind you don't throw me over. Let us sit down here at the end of the room till the band strikes up.'

Presently the strains of 'Brises des Nuits' were heard, recalling wandering dancers.

'Look, Lady Fairfax! here's a good-looking young hussar coming over here. I know he is going to ask you to dance. Remember your promise.'

'Where is he?' she asked indifferently.

'There, in the middle of the room. He has stopped to speak to that little artillery man with the sandy moustache. Don't you see him? A handsome, determined-looking fellow. I saw a fixed purpose in his eye just now; but you won't *hear* of it, will you? Here he comes.'

'But he is my husband!' exclaimed Alice triumphantly. 'You see he did not forget the dance after all.'

'That Fairfax! Why, I thought he was quite elderly, and he does not look more than six or seven-and-twenty. I see he is a V.C., and I have been wondering who he was all the evening. Will you introduce me?'

'I believe this is our dance, Alice?' said Sir Reginald stiffly.

'Yes, I think so,' she replied, rising with assumed indifference.

Having presented her late partner, she took her husband's arm and joined the dancers; one step—two steps—and they floated off.

'How well that couple waltz,' was remarked by more than one. 'They are the best dancers in the room,' observed a man, who considered himself a good judge and a still better performer.

Their step suited exactly, and they glided easily in and out among the bumping, revolving crowd, with a combination of ease and grace that justified his remark. Reginald's London seasons stood him in good stead; and when Alice felt his arm firmly encircling her waist, and they plunged into the giddy vortex, she was perfectly confident that, so

good was his steering, so quick his eye, and so perfect his step, that no matter what frantic or ponderous couples were afloat, *she* would meet with no collisions. She could not restrain a pardonable feeling of pride as she saw glance after glance levelled at herself and her husband with unmistakable approval. It was some time before Steepshire society realised the stupendous fact that 'Fairfax was dancing with his wife.' It was, 'Who is the pretty girl dancing with Fairfax?' or, 'Who is the hussar Lady Fairfax has got hold of?' But when they had taken the idea well into their minds they were dumbfounded. 'Where was the *divorcée?*' Where was the enraged husband? Above all, where was the *idiot* who had promoted such a scandal? The Fairfaxes were on the very best of terms. They were the handsomest couple in the room; they were *devoted* to each other.' Such were the whispers that floated round; and Alice was rehabilitated as quickly as her friends could desire, and placed, by public opinion, on the very top rung of the social ladder.

Alice knew perfectly that her husband had danced with her with an object in view. She felt that it was a most decided 'duty dance.' Not for an instant did his arm linger round her waist; not for a second did his hand press hers. If she had been the merest stranger he could not have treated her with more distant ceremony. She paused to take breath for a few seconds, and they came to a standstill just opposite a large mirror, which faced them right across the room. She looked over, and saw a tall slight girl in white, fanning herself with a large feather fan; and it also reflected a very good-looking hussar, clad in all the pomp and panoply of his profession. His dark-blue gold-laced uniform became him well. He was leaning against the wall, watching the crowd with an air of supreme indifference and a decidedly bored expres-

sion of countenance. 'Who would think we were husband and wife?' thought Alice, as she glanced once more at that couple across the room—'who indeed? I will make one more effort to-night if I have an opportunity. It will be my last attempt at making friends. If I fail now I fail for ever.'

When the dance had concluded, Sir Reginald led his partner through the series of long rooms, in the wake of a multitude of others; not a few drifted aside into various sequestered bowers of flirtation, but the mass of dancers kept on moving down the great corridor; their goal appeared to be the garden, and many couples were soon scattered over its grassy sward. Our hero and heroine found their way into the conservatory. It was a charming place; a dim religious light, distributed by Chinese lanterns, sufficed to show gigantic tropical plants, palms, pyramids of flowers, and various cunningly-placed crimson seats for *two*. Having found a vacancy in a retired nook, Sir Reginald threw himself into one corner of the sofa when Alice had seated herself at the other; a silence, broken only by the murmur of half-a-dozen adjacent flirtations and the splash of a fountain, lasted for at least five minutes.

'What possessed me to come here?' thought Reginald to himself. 'Absence of mind? I forgot for the moment it was not old times. This is just the sort of place we used to affect before we were married.' He looked at his wife—contemplated her with a grave, critical scrutiny almost severe. She was leaning back in her corner, playing with her fan. The red background of the couch threw her slender, graceful figure into bold relief. She was very lovely, certainly; and, now he came to think of it, there *was* a melancholy look on her face when in repose.

'Reginald,' she said, sitting up and facing him, 'do you remember the last time we danced together?'

'No! I think not!' he answered dubiously.

(I think you *do*, Sir Reginald.)

'It was at the Lancasters; we danced together half the evening.'

'Did we? Then we must have made ourselves rather remarkable,' he replied, with a short laugh, breaking off a large bit of fern and critically examining its fronds.

'Do you remember the ball at Burford House?'

Considering that it was at that very ball he had proposed to her, he could not well plead forgetfulness.

'I do, of course,' he answered, glancing at her quickly, and pausing in the act of dissecting the fern bit by bit. 'What is the good of calling up these reminiscences? There are some things which are best forgotten,' he added, with cool, judicial serenity.

'Do you wish to forget *that* evening, Reginald?' she asked, in a tone of low reproach, and raising her fan to hide her trembling lips.

'Well, no,' he replied slowly, and with evident reluctance. 'Not yet; but I quite agree with Balzac, that "life would be intolerable without a certain amount of forgetting;" and I am glad to say that I have forgotten *much*.'

'Why should you endeavour to forget? Why are you so changed to me, Reginald?' she asked, with an enormous effort. 'What makes you so stern, so hard to me?' she faltered, laying a timid little hand on his. 'Won't you tell me?'

He would—he will—he is about to speak—he has thrown away the fern-stalk, and has taken her hand firmly in his own. Precisely at this critical moment a well-known voice exclaimed jovially,—

'So here you are!' and Geoffrey suddenly appeared before them. 'Fairly run to earth! A nice dance you've led me. None but a couple of regular professional flirts would have found out this

cover. Alice, your partners are literally tearing each other to pieces in the ballroom, and unless you wish for *bloodshed* you had better be off—It's really serious!' offering his arm. 'You have five men waiting for the same dance.'

Oh, Geoffrey! Geoffrey! If you had only come five minutes later! Reginald dropped Alice's hand like the traditional live coal, and Alice shrank back into her corner of the sofa at the first sound of her cousin's approach.

'I'm engaged for this too,' said Reginald, rising and looking at his programme. 'You will take Alice back to the ballroom, I suppose, then?' he observed, with extraordinary command of countenance; and, turning away, he sauntered off, ostensibly in search of his own partner.

The ball was over; people were leaving in crowds —the Fairfaxes among the first flight.

'Alice,' said Geoffrey from his corner of the carriage, 'I am proud of you; you took the shine out of them all to-night. *Now*, I can believe in the old duke's infatuation.'

'What duke?' asked Miss Ferrars sleepily.

'Have you never heard that the old Duke of St Remo, old enough to be her great-grandfather, fell madly in love with my pretty little cousin when she was at Nice, and proposed in due form?'

'Geoffrey, be quiet; you are really very provoking. Do leave me alone,' crossly.

'Don't interrupt; you know you are very *proud* of his scalp, though you would not be a duchess. Is not his proposal kept among our family archives to this day?'

'Geoffrey; only I am so sleepy I would box your ears. Meanwhile, permit me to remind you of one word—the mystic word, *wait!*'

'Fancy, descending from a duke to a baronet! I am a deeply injured man. Only for your nonsense, I might have been quoting, "My cousin the

'duchess." You would have made such a sweet little nurse. I daresay you would have been spoon-feeding the dear old fellow by this time, whereas, thanks to your heartless conduct, he has been hurried to an early grave.'

'How foolish of you not to have accepted him, Alice!' put in Mary, with lazy interest.

'Was she not? Miss Fane did all she could to make her; but she only cried and sobbed, and made no end of scenes; so she had to get her own way. You always *do* get your own way, don't you, Lady Fairfax?'

But all this was thrown away on Alice, who was leaning back in her corner apparently fast asleep.

'Only we had to go in our war-paint; it was a very pleasant ball, wasn't it, Rex? I'm nearly smothered in this tunic. I suppose you, as my senior officer, would not hear of my taking it off, would you?'

'No,' replied Reginald, with a yawn; suppose you follow the general example and go to sleep. I'll excuse *that* if you like.'

A very weary, drowsy party ascended the shallow steps of Monkswood, as the stars were disappearing and giving place to the grey dawn. With yawns and candles they all dispersed, leaden-footed, to their own apartments, to seek tired Nature's soft restorer, sleep.

But there was little sleep for Sir Reginald, nor had he any apparent inclination to woo the fickle goddess, as he paced his long, low-roofed bed-chamber from end to end.

'What did Alice mean to-night?' he said to himself. 'How weak I am where she is concerned! I was on the point of yielding; only for Geoffrey it was all over with me. Fancy a Fairfax breaking his word of honour—his oath! Well, in ten days' time I may go; in ten days more I shall have made sufficient sacrifice to the shrine of public

opinion, and in ten days I shall be out of the way of temptation.'

A knock at the door—an angry knock.

Enter to him Geoffrey, robed in a dressing-gown of blinding brilliancy.

'I say, Rex, are you doing sentry-go? because, if *not*, will you have the goodness to remember that my room is under yours?'

Exit, with slam of door.

Reginald accepted the rebuke, and, ceasing his promenade, seated himself on the edge of his bed in a very dissatisfied frame of mind. He had miscalculated his strength on which he piqued himself. His iron will appeared a very flexible article to him now. He had thought himself man enough to remain at Monkswood, mixing daily and familiarly with Alice, unmoved and unruffled, the very embodiment of the typical iceberg; and now he found he could not bear it—it was too much for his self-control. How capricious she was! one morning full of solicitude for his safety, changing ere evening like the veriest weathercock. On rare occasions amazing him with a glimpse of her former self, as on the day after Helen's arrival (attributed by him to the immediate result of Helen's influence), and on the evening before the races. After that, the thermometer of her manners changed from fair to freezing. But this evening again there had been a thaw. What did it mean? Better sustain an even temperament throughout as he did. She was ready enough to reproach him with harshness, to win him into good-humour with herself, to recur to the past as if there were no barrier between them, and that barrier wholly erected and sustained by her. Had she forgotten that he had sworn he would never be reconciled save on *one* condition? Not likely; she must remember it as well as he did himself.

'If I could believe that she cared for me,' he

said, 'it would be different. Once or twice I have been mad enough to think so, but only for a moment; cool reflection, and Alice's subsequent treatment, effectually dispelled my illusions on that score. She never would have left me all those years without one line; she never would have given me such a freezing reception, not one word of welcome for the present or regret for the past. Reginald Fairfax,' he added aloud, as he rose and began to pull off his tunic, 'listen to common sense, keep out of your wife's way, for you are a greater fool than I thought you; keep aloof from her altogether, if you would wish to say when you leave this roof for ever, all is lost save *honour*. If she had had anything to say to you, it would have been said long ago. Sitting up all night won't mend matters. Sitting up all night won't make her ask you to forgive and forget; she will never give in. And,' after a pause and glancing at himself sternly in the glass, 'if I know *you*, you'll never give in either.' Having garrisoned his mind with this reflection, he followed the example of the household, and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LOST WEDDING-RING.

THE morning after the ball, neither Mary nor Alice appeared at breakfast, nor did they descend till nearly luncheon-time. Helen Mayhew's portly figure was filling up a goodly portion of the open window, as she looked out on the terrace at Reginald playing with Maurice.

'Come here, Alice,' she said, as Alice languidly entered the room. 'Is it not a pretty sight to see Reginald with his little boy?'

Alice approached and looked over her shoulder, and saw her husband leaning against the balustrade and making a small boat for Maurice, who, perched up beside him on the broad parapet, was watching his proceedings with the most lively interest, occasionally making suggestions and talking ceaselessly; the most thorough understanding between the pair was evident. Both faces were equally intent on the work in hand, and the resemblance between them was more striking than ever. Suddenly Reginald glanced up and saw Helen; lifting Maurice in his arms, he came closer to the window.

'Look at my boat,' cried Maurice, waving it towards her; 'it's going to be painted blue, and I'm to sail it this evening—he is going to show me; ruffling up his father's short locks with small tanned fingers.

Reginald set him down, and glanced from him to Helen with a smile of unbounded pride, but catching sight of Alice the smile died away, and nodding her a cool good-morning, he turned away and led Maurice up the steps into the house.

'Why does he treat me so?' whispered Alice indignantly. 'He never speaks of the child to me, and scarcely notices him when I am present, although he is my child—I am his mother; he spends hours with Maurice alone, and Maurice adores him. What does he mean? Is he afraid I would be jealous?'

'Ask him, my dear, ask him. Here he is, and here is luncheon,' she answered gaily.

'What shall we do this afternoon?' was the question that went round the table. 'It's too hot to ride, too hot for tennis. What shall we do?'

'Go and eat fruit in the garden,' suggested Geoffrey serenely.

'What! the *whole* afternoon?' exclaimed Reginald aghast.

'Let us first gather some fruit, and then go for a walk up to the top of Beecher's Hill,' put in Miss Ferrars.

'Energetic young person! I admire, but I decline to emulate your pedestrian powers,' said Geoffrey, putting up his eyeglass and gazing at her with calm approval.

'To Beecher's Hill we will go by all means,' assented Helen. 'I am quite in the humour for a nice stroll.'

'It's a pretty steep stroll I can tell you! Don't expect me to pull you up the hill.'

'I never expect any politeness from *you*, Geoffrey,' she replied, with a smile. 'What a lazy, good-for-nothing boy you are! Let us all go and get ready; by the time we start it will be nearly four o'clock.'

'But it would be madness to start now,' expostulated Alice; 'think of toiling uphill in this broiling sun! Wait till it is a little cooler.'

'The walk in the sun will do Helen good. She wants severe exercise badly,' said Geoffrey, looking at her dispassionately. 'If you were to put on a couple of sealskin jackets, Reginald's poshteen, and my frieze ulster, you would be wise.'

'You are raving, my good Geoffrey! Too much dancing has affected your reason,' replied Mrs Mayhew.

'I have method in my madness at any rate—the symmetry of your figure at heart,' responded the young man, with an air of deep interest.

'I'm not a bit stouter than Mrs Russell, whom you profess to admire so much.'

'I don't admire her at all! She is like a bolster tied in the middle,' remonstrated Geoffrey vehemently. 'She has a figure like a cottage loaf.'

'You may as well make him a present of the last word, Helen,' observed Alice, taking her by the arm and leading her out of the room. 'There is no use arguing with him; he has *such* a tongue,

and he is utterly unscrupulous as to what he says.'

'People who live in glass houses should not throw stones,' shouted Geoffrey.

'There!' exclaimed Alice, stopping with one foot on the stairs, 'I knew it! I told you he would have the last word. No one can silence him but Reginald, and, to quote Geoffrey's own language, he shuts him up beautifully.'

Five o'clock found the walking party reclining in various luxurious attitudes on the top of Beecher's Hill — they had evidently but recently arrived. Alice and Geoffrey has scooped out a comfortable nest in the side of a haycock, without loss of time, and were resting after their joint labours.

Under an adjoining 'wind' were the remainder of the party. Helen, much out of breath, was fanning herself with feverish energy. Mark presented a grotesque appearance, with loosened necktie, his head covered by a large straw hat, under which he had inserted an enormous cabbage-leaf, which drooped gracefully over his eyes. Prone at his feet lay Reginald, his hands clasped behind his head, his hat tilted far over his forehead—he looked the very embodiment of lazy comfort. Alice turned her attention for some time to the prospect that lay beneath her eyes—a truly English scene. Their own park was immediately below; beyond that, deeply embedded in trees, and merely discovering itself by the smoke from its cottages, a pretty little hamlet tried to conceal itself; then came golden corn-fields, the spire of a Norman church, the steeple at Manister; a long low range of purple hills framed the horizon. It was a lovely summer's evening, the air was so clear one could see for miles; it was so still, that various curious insects in the grass and the booming of homeward-bound bees alone broke the silence.

Something tickling her neck made Alice abruptly

turn her head; it was Geoffrey, of course, with a long piece of spear-grass, with which he had been diligently chasing hay-spiders. 'Alice,' he whispered, 'let us go over quietly and topple the whole of the haycock over them, it will be no end of fun. I don't know which will be the most furious, Reginald or Helen. Come along,' holding out his hand encouragingly; 'it is an innocent pastime for an idle moment.'

'No, no, Geoffrey; you had better not, mind—'

'Well, will you promise to engage them in lively conversation whilst I go behind and loosen the whole concern? When I cough I advise you to move.'

'I'll have nothing to say to it. Do you think I am a school girl? I'm too old for such nonsense!' cried Alice irritably.

'I think you are in one of your tempers, that's what I think,' returned her cousin, in a tone of candid conviction.

'If you think so you are very much mistaken. You may dismiss *that* notion from your mind.'

'I'm sincerely glad to hear it. What was that you were saying to Reginald last night in the conservatory when I came on the scene? He did not look a bit too well pleased to see me? Alice, have you ever begged his pardon for the way you treated him once upon a time? Tell me all about it; I know you are yearning to unbosom yourself to me,' he added, with an air of frank companionship, and sitting closer to her.

'Geoffrey, your impertinence is really intolerable!' exclaimed Alice haughtily, and colouring with anger. 'You quite forget yourself!'

'Ah, I thought you were in a bad humour just now,' he drawled; 'I know all the symptoms so well from sad experience; so does Reginald, I am sure.'

'Don't dare to speak to me; you have no *right*

to talk to me in such a way, and I won't listen to you!' exclaimed Alice, with flashing eyes.

'Little Spitfire!' ejaculated Geoffrey, surveying her crimson cheeks with calm derision.

Whereupon Alice indignantly turned her back upon him and withdrew into her own corner of the nest, where she sat in silent, dignified retirement. She could see that the others were spending their time far more agreeably, and sincerely wished that she was one of the party, but her pride forbade her to move. Mary was evidently telling them an amusing story with much animation and gesticulation. A low but highly appreciative laugh from Reginald, as the tale concluded, showed that he had been an attentive listener. Raising himself on his elbow, he contributed his share to the general entertainment in a few short sentences; whatever he had said found entire favour with his audience, and elicited peals of applauding laughter from all three, as he once more subsided, and drew his hat over his eyes.

'He never thinks it worth his while to amuse *me* now,' thought Alice, with a half-envious, half-wistful glance in that direction.

'I'm being devoured alive by midges!' suddenly exclaimed Geoffrey, jumping up and waving his handkerchief madly to and fro. 'How you can stand them I can't imagine; they are in my hair!' with frenzied rubbing of his lint-white locks—'my ears, my eyes! I shall go out of my mind if I stay here any longer! I say, Alice, can I speak to you now?'

'Depends altogether upon the topic you are going to broach,' replied Alice, in a frosty tone.

'Don't look so grumpy, my dear little girl,' reaching out a hand to help her to rise, and of which she availed herself.

'"And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain,"'

quoted Geoffrey, dragging her into a perpendicular position.

'Come along down to the river and see if there are any trout rising.'

'There are none to rise.'

'There must be; it's just their supper-time. Well, anything is better than squatting in the hay for the delectation of the insect world; come and look for a bees'-nest down in the bottom of the meadow.'

The hunt for the bees'-nest was fruitless. Alice, for one, brought neither zeal nor energy to the task. As they dawdled slowly homewards, Geoffrey suddenly said, as if struck by a brilliant idea,—

'By Jove! next Tuesday the grouse shooting commences, the glorious Twelfth! I don't know how I'm to break the news to you, Alice; but on Monday we must part. Old Macfarlane has asked me this year, thank the kind Fates! and his moors and his shooting are simply—supreme. He asked Rex too, and was awfully keen about getting him, knowing him to be such a good gun—the old boy takes no end of pride out of his big bags—and only fancy,' standing in the pathway, and declaiming, with one waving arm, 'he is *not* going. Did you ever know such a duffer? Imagine his refusing the primest shooting north o' Tweed! And for what? He gives no reason, and I can't even hazard a guess. It certainly can't be on *your* account,' contemplating his cousin with a cool, deliberate, speculative stare.

'If the question baffles your acute imagination, of course it is utterly beyond mine,' returned Alice, with an emphatic shake of her lovely head, and a perceptible increase of colour. 'See, Geoff,' she added eagerly, 'the others are all going through the wood. We may as well go too; I want some moss and ferns for the dinner-table.'

Having joined the rest of the party, a general

search for ferns commenced, and they were gradually moving homewards, when a masterly manœuvre of Geoffrey's left Alice and Reginald to bring up the rear alone—a most unpremeditated *tête-à-tête.*

As they crossed a rustic bridge that spanned a small but rapid torrent, they paused and looked down at the foam sailing along in solid-looking blocks, at the wet and mossy rocks, and the small noisy waterfall.

'How I should like to go down there and dabble!' said Alice, taking off her gloves.

In pulling off the left one she also drew off her wedding-ring, which instantly disappeared in the current below.

She looked after it, or rather at the spot where it had fallen in, in silent consternation; then, turning to her husband with awestruck face, exclaimed,—

'My ring is gone! What *am* I to do?'

'I'm sure I can't say,' he replied coldly.

'Can't you fish it up some way—if you were to wade in?' she cried excitedly.

'I don't know what *you* call wading, but the water there is at least nine feet deep, and your ring is probably a quarter of a mile off by this time,' he answered, with provoking indifference.

'But what am I to do for my wedding-ring?' she urged piteously, looking down at her hand with burning cheeks.

'Buy another, I conclude; you can get one for a guinea or thirty shillings. It depends upon whether you like them thick or thin. This will be your *third*, so you must have quite a settled opinion on the subject,' he replied, calmly aiming bits of gravel at a particular rock in the torrent below.

Certainly this was not encouraging behaviour; nevertheless, she braced up her courage, and determined to make one more attempt to recover her original ring.

'Give me my own ring, Reginald.'

'I have already told you, Alice, that I will *not*,' he returned, still pursuing his amusement.

'And will you never take me back as your wife?' she asked, almost inaudibly.

'What do you mean?' he inquired, arresting himself in the act of taking aim, and turning towards her at last.

'What I say,' she replied, with more firmness.

'I shall only be too glad to take you back, as you call it, now—this instant.'

'Do you really mean it?'

'Yes, of course I do; but have you not something to say to me besides?' he asked, looking at her anxiously.

Was ever anyone so blind to the right employment of great opportunities?

'No,' she replied innocently; 'what more can I say than I have already said? I have nothing to say.'

'Than what you have already said!' he cried indignantly. 'You dare to allude to it—you are not ashamed of it?'

'No,' she faltered, much bewildered.

Her husband scarcely heard her. His face was dark with passion; his voice vibrated with intense emotion as he added,—

'Such a gratuitous repetition of insult I never heard of. You want an answer to your question; you want to know when I shall take you back? I give it to you in one word—*never*'—a long pause, during which Alice stood dazed and stupefied—she felt as if a dark wave of trouble had overwhelmed her senses. 'The day after to-morrow,' he proceeded firmly, 'I am going to Looton. I shall take Maurice with me, to keep me company. You have had him for more than three years, remember,' he replied to the remonstrance he saw in her eyes. 'I will send him back to you when I go

down to Northampton, and you may keep him for the next four years.'

'What do you mean, Reginald?' interrupted Alice, struggling hard for composure, and fixing on him a strained, eager gaze.

'I mean that until Maurice is seven he may stay with you; after that time I hope to have returned from India, and settled down at Looton, and I intend to have him to live with me. I am not going to be a wanderer all my life; I owe some duties to my people as well as to my country. You will not mind parting with Maurice. You have shown me to-night plainly that you are utterly heartless.'

'Do I understand,' she faltered, supporting herself by the railing, 'that you will take Maurice from me in four years' time?'

'Yes; legally, I have a right to do so.'

'I don't believe it,' she cried passionately. 'No law could be so wicked as to deprive me of my only child. What a cruel, hard-hearted man you are to say such things to me! Can you be the Reginald Fairfax I married? Your voice and appearance are identical, but otherwise you are as different as night and day. *He* was only too good to me; he loved me far better than I deserved.'

'He did indeed,' interrupted her husband grimly.

'You,' she pursued, almost fiercely, 'have a heart like stone, a tongue like a sword. You are stern, harsh, implacable, tyrannical; you can't be the same.'

'You are right,' he answered decisively; 'I am *not* the original Reginald Fairfax; I am an older and wiser, if not better man. My illusions have been dispelled, my suspectibilities blunted, my eyes rudely opened. I know *you* to be an extraordinary combination of caprice, obstinacy, and inconsistency.' He broke off, and looked at her with a mixture of contempt and indignation; he dared not trust to speech.

'I don't know what you mean; I have abased myself sufficiently, my conscience tells me,' she replied, with quivering lips. 'You thrust me aside with scorn, and even add that you will take my child from me.' Here her grief overcame all considerations, and covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

There was a very dark look on her husband's face as he surveyed her for some moments in silence; he was extremely angry with her; he thought she had befooled him again, played with his feelings as a cat with a mouse. He was wounded to the heart and bitterly disappointed. Each day he had been lingering on in hopes of one word of regret. With even *one* he would have been satisfied. To tell him she thought the same as ever was too much; it was inconceivable, it was impossible, it was maddening. 'She must be a born actress,' he thought, as he stood opposite her. 'This grief is all feigned.' Still, as he watched the tears trickling through her fingers he relented somewhat. In the first place, he could not endure to see any woman crying, much less Alice. She little knew what a powerful weapon she was using against him. As he looked at her slight figure, heaving with half suppressed sobs, his conscience smote him. He *was* hard, cruel, and tyrannical. After all she was only a girl, and a very frail, delicate one too. Was this the way to guard her as the apple of his eye, to restore her to health, to study every wish? Scarcely.

'Alice,' he said, gently removing her hands, 'don't cry like this; I can't bear to see you.'

'Then why do you make me cry?' she sobbed plaintively.

'I won't do it again,' offering her his handkerchief; her own had gone home in Geoffrey's charge, filled with moss and roots. 'I never saw you cry before, and I hope I never shall again.'

'Then you won't take Maurice from me?' she pleaded, raising her tear-stained face to his, with a look of passionate supplication.

'No, but you will lend him to me sometimes?'

'Ye-es,' very dubiously; 'but you can always come here to see him.'

'Pardon me, I never intend coming here again. Once I leave I shall never return.'

'Never return!' The words seemed to echo and vibrate through the dim leafy silence of the surrounding trees.

'Oh, Reginald!'

'Now, Alice, you are never going to be so foolish as to cry for *that?*' he asked roughly.

Sobs. What was he to do with her?

'Alice, why are you crying? You promised me that you would not.'

They were now walking home; but Alice's supply of tears seemed unlimited. This was a new and alarming experience.

'Alice,' he repeated, 'you promised me you would not cry any more.'

'Yes, but you promised'—gasp—'you would not make me cry'—gasp. 'I know you think me no better than a baby, but I can't help it—I can't, indeed.'

More very bitter tears.

'Well,' said he, in despair, 'if I come here for a few days at Christmas, will you be satisfied?'

'Yes,' she faintly whispered.

'Then dry your eyes; don't let me see another tear. You have had your own way altogether, have you not?—tyrant as I am!'

'Yes,' she replied, with a sickly smile.

She looked so pale, dishevelled, and wan, that he felt absolutely guilty as he gazed at her forlorn-looking face.

Silently and rapidly they pursued the woodland path, where barely two might walk abreast. Above

them the trees had laid their heads together, and combined in league to keep out the sun. A stillness weighed on the surrounding woods; the wind had died away; the birds were silent. Not more silent than the bronzed young soldier and the pale agitated girl, who walked together, side by side.

Alice was in hopes of reaching her room unseen. But no such good fortune was in store for her. On the stairs she came face to face with Geoffrey, who, calmly surveying her tear-stained cheeks, gave a long and eloquent whistle, and chanted, as he passed downstairs,—

'But, children, you should never let
Your angry passions rise,
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.'

On entering the library, he found Reginald making lame excuses for Alice's non-appearance to Helen, who was pouring out tea. He boldly walked over to him and whispered right into his ear,—

'You've been bullying her, I see.'

Reginald's indignant negative was completely thrown away on Geoffrey, who had already seated himself at the tea-table, under the shelter of Helen's protection. So ended this disastrous walk.

. . . . . .

Alice's reflections as she stood at her window in the gloaming were not of a very rose-coloured hue. All that she most valued in this world—her husband's love—had slipped from her grasp. The efforts she made to be reconciled were utterly in vain; a cool, determined indifference met and repulsed all her advances; advances which she afterwards blushed to remember, and propitiated her wounded pride by increased haughtiness and reserve.

'It was hard to realise that he *was* her husband,' she thought, as very, very bitter tears welled up

into her eyes. With what distant politeness and formality he treated her! If he unintentionally touched her, or brushed against her, he apologised as ceremoniously as if she were a stranger. He treated her as such, even though he had promised to be her friend. What would she not give to recall the reception she had given him? Too late to think of that now! he had taken her at her word—they were strangers. How would it all end? No matter what occurred, she could not well be more miserable than she was—a despised, disowned, detested wife!

CHAPTER XXX.

MARY JANE'S DISCOVERY.

'All yet seems well, as if it ends so meet,
The bitter past more welcome is the sweet.'

IT is a sultry August evening; Mary Jane, the upper housemaid, much refreshed by her comfortable tea, is sitting at an open window, gossiping with the head laundry-maid, and unpicking a brown merino dress, which she is praising to the skies.

'Real French, four shillings a yard. We all got dresses when Sir Reginald was married. I've had this three winters, and, thanks to the lining, there's a good three winters' more wear in it yet. I would have left it as it is, only it's old-fashioned, you see,' holding it up with a deprecating gesture. 'Parker is going to lend me one of Lady Fairfax's for a pattern, that cream-coloured one; she had it on on Sunday.'

'Eh,' said her companion—whose fingers were equally busy, giving some startling finishing touches to a Dolly Varden hat—'but it will never suit *you*.

You're too plump, Mary Jane; what looks well on a slip of a girl like her is nothing to go by; one of Miss Ferrars' dresses now would be more your style. That rose and grey thing, with the kilted skirt, and the plaster up the front, for instance. This brown, piped with red, and red bows like hers, would look fine and fashionable.'

'Maybe you are right,' replied Mary Jane, putting her thimble in her mouth and looking at her friend reflectively. 'I'll have a look at it this evening whilst they are at dinner. The grey one, did you say?'

'See, here they come! the whole riding party!' exclaimed the laundry-maid, with animation. 'Just look, Polly, and you'll see Sir Reginald will never offer to lift my lady off her horse; he leaves it to Mr Geoffrey. See, there, I told you so! Ain't they just a queer couple? I can't make them out. If they were old, or if one of them was ugly even, you might understand. They do say,' she continued confidentially, 'as how Sir Reginald never meant to marry her, nor anyone, only she was his ward, and he thought that it would be the best way to look after her, but that he don't care two straws about her; he hates womankind, Cox says.'

'Well, I'm sure,' replied Mary Jane, with a toss of her head, 'if that sweet young lady isn't good enough for him, I should like to know what he wants more! She's too good for him, I'm thinking; that's what ails him! He may be very handsome, and a great fighter—and he is a grand-looking young gentleman—but I think he treats her shameful, if all be true, never speaking to her nor looking at her no more nor if she were a marble statue set up in the corner. I'll never forget how good she was to me when I had a sore hand last winter, dressing it her own self every day, and always speaking to me so nice and kind all the time. Dear, dear! If Philip Banks was to turn

out such a husband as hers I should cry off, I can tell you,' she concluded, with a decided slap of her bare hand on the stone window-sill. 'I did hear,' she continued, 'as how he was very fond of her once. I was sick and at home when they came to Looton, but they say as he downright worshipped her just at first. Mrs Morris herself told me, but I don't believe it. I never saw no signs of it. Seeing's believing to my mind. Laws! what's this in the lining? A letter, I declare! It must have run down from the pocket-hole. My stars, Johanna, whatever shall I do?' turning a very dismayed countenance to her friend. 'It's a letter Lady Fairfax gave me to post a good three years ago to Sir Reginald. I remember now quite well reading the address. She seemed so terribly put out that the post-bag had gone, and as I was going down to the village, I offered to take it along with three or four from the servants' hall. I put them all in my pocket, and this has slipped into the lining instead. What *am* I to do?' she asked, with breathless volubility.

'I would ask Mrs Morris, if I were you. There she is in the passage now; run and catch her.'

Mrs Morris said,—

'Take it to Sir Reginald after dinner, and tell him how it happened; honesty is the best policy.'

'Not for millions! I'll take it to my lady, if you like. She could not scold if she tried ever so.'

'He won't say a word to you either, Mary Jane. He is just his father all over. There never was a quieter nor a kinder master; and, besides, how could anyone scold you for what was an accident?'

'I tell you, Mrs Morris, I'm afraid of my life of him. I see him every morning coming down before seven. He passes me just as if I was a sweeping brush. Now, if it was Mr Geoffrey—he always has a word and a joke—I'm not a bit afraid of *him!*'

'Mr Geoffrey is a good deal too fond of joking and jesting with servants and keeping them from their work; and you will just take that letter and give it to Sir Reginald before you sleep to-night,' concluded Mrs Morris authoritatively.

'But he looks so stern and severe, I shall just sink into the ground if he gives me one of those sharp looks of his.'

'Don't you talk rubbish, Mary Jane; go and give up that letter after dinner, and be off to your rooms now.'

. . . . . .

Dinner over, the laundry-maid came into the servants' hall, and whispered to her reluctant friend,—

'Now is your time, Polly. They are all in the pleasure-ground except Sir Reginald, and he's writing in the library, Thomas says. Just you go and give a knock at the door, and hand in the letter; he can't *eat* you. I'll go with you as far as the swing-door,' she added generously, 'and wait.'

With loudly-beating heart, Mary Jane arrived at the library door, knocked, and entered. Her master was writing at a table by the light of a reading-lamp. He looked up, and gazed into the shadow for some seconds before he exactly made her out.

Then, laying down his pen, he said,—

'Well, what is your business? One of the servants, are you not?'

There was more of the 'orderly room' in his manner than was altogether pleasant. His dealings with soldiers' wives were short, sharp, and decisive; the very unruly women of the Seventeenth Hussars were more afraid of three words from the Major than a hundred from the Colonel.

He imagined that Mary Jane had come to lodge some complaint, so he repeated,—

'What can I do for you? what do you want?'

'Please, sir, I'm Foster, the upper housemaid,

and it's about this letter,' said she, timidly approaching, and laying down the yellow, crumpled missive.

'A letter,' he repeated carelessly, taking it up; but seeing the superscription, he changed colour 'And *where*, may I ask, did you get this?'

'Please, sir, Lady Fairfax gave it to me to post more than three years ago. It must have slipped down between the lining of my dress and the pocket. I found it just now when I was ripping up the skirt. I'm very sorry indeed, sir, for I remember now that Lady Fairfax was very particular about it. I made sure I had posted it with the others.'

'Well, at any rate, it was not your fault!' he exclaimed, after some reflection, turning over the long-looked-for letter in his hand. 'It was honest of you to bring it to me; you might have burnt it, and said nothing about it; and it happens to be a letter of the very greatest consequence. Here,' said he, unlocking a drawer, 'is a note instead,' handing her ten pounds; 'and see that your pockets have no holes in them in future.'

Mary Jane received the gift with profuse and voluble thanks, as she backed and curtseyed out of the room; and from that time forward declared that her master was the nicest, pleasantest, most generous gentleman in England.

It is needless to say that Sir Reginald lost no time in tearing open the letter, which ran as follows:—

'MY DEAR HUSBAND,—You will be surprised to get a letter from me, considering my very recent heartless, wicked treatment of you, and more surprised still to hear that I am writing to entreat your forgiveness. Ever since you left I have been so very, very miserable, and as each day has passed I have been more firmly convinced of your innocence, and that I have been the most unjust and

ungenerous of wives. You will, I know, make allowance for my youth and a naturally jealous hot temper. These are but feeble excuses; no one but you, who have always been so good to me, would entertain them for an instant. I sometimes think I must have been mad; any way, whatever *you* may do, I shall never forgive myself. But you will pardon me, I know; not only because of your promise, but because—how can I tell you? I had a bad fainting fit the other day, and Morris was frightened and sent for the doctor; he says that before summer, all being well, there will be a little inmate in the nursery here. I have not told this great secret to anyone, neither must you. Long before summer your letter will have come, won't it? Once this has fairly started, I shall count the very days till the answer comes back. If none comes, I will know that you *cannot* forgive me, and indeed I don't deserve that you should. But you *will* write to me a kind letter too, my darling Regy. Think how very lonely I am; I have no one but you in all the world. The post is just going out, so I must conclude. I direct this by the address you left with Helen, so it will be sure to reach you safely. Mind you write by return mail to—Your loving and penitent wife, ALICE FAIRFAX.'

When he had read this to the end, he laid it down, and began to pace about the room in great agitation.

'What a brute I must seem to her! What must she have thought of me all these years? Why, no later than yesterday'—he paused in his walk, overwhelmed with the recollection—'I rejected her overtures for peace. I was savagely rude to her. My poor little Alice, you had indeed said quite enough, more than enough,' he muttered, resuming his walk. 'What must she think

of me? How can she have borne with me all this time? I refused, yes, point-blank, to kiss her, idiot that I was. I might have guessed at something of this kind, only that my devilish pride had strangled my common sense; and all this frightful misunderstanding was owing to this wretched bit of paper, this letter, that I would have given five years of my life for, and she, poor girl, has been breaking her heart about, and all the time it has been lying inside the skirt of that woman's dress. After all,' he continued, taking it up, 'it is a very dear and precious letter; I would not part with it, late as it comes, for a field-marshal's baton. He read it twice over again, lingering on almost every word, then folded it up very carefully and put it in his waistcoat-pocket as he walked to the window. 'No wonder,' said he, 'she gave me a cool reception; I wonder what sort of one she would give me *now* if I could catch her alone? She ought to hate me pretty well by this time, it is not *my* fault if she does not. But she likes me a little bit still. She must, or she never could have stood the way I have treated her. If she only cares for me just one quarter as much as I care for her we shall do very well,' he thought to himself joyfully, as he stepped out of the window and joined the party who were sitting in the pleasure ground, basking in the moonlight, and inhaling the soft bracing air, heavy with the perfume of syringa, roses, and new-mown hay.

Mr and Mrs Mayhew, Miss Saville, and Mary were reposing in various garden-chairs.

'Where is Alice?' asked her husband abruptly.

'Oh, she and Geoffrey have gone to gather pears for the public weal.'

'What, at this hour!' he exclaimed, standing at the top of the steps, gazing after two figures who were rapidly disappearing in the direction of the garden. 'Small chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Alice

to-night,' he said to himself, as he pulled his moustache thoughtfully.

Five minutes later, Geoffrey came running back alone; breathlessly he jerked out,—'*Such* a trick as I've played her! She offered to race me to the big pear-tree, each starting from the garden-gate, and going one north the other south; I agreed, and when I saw her well started south I just came home! What a state she will be in when she finds herself alone at the end of the ghost-walk! She says she is *not*, but I believe she is, horribly afraid of ghosts and bogies; and if she meets the cavalier who is said to stalk about the garden, won't it be fun? I only wish I had thought of it in time, I'd have dressed up. It pays her off nicely for some of the pretty little jokes she has practised on me. It's not too late yet'—snatching up a shawl and a garden-hat and commencing a toilet.

'I can't say that I exactly see the humour of the situation,' said Reginald, as, springing down the steps and vaulting lightly over an iron railing, he set off by a short cut to the garden at a run.

'Active fellow, is he not?' observed Geoffrey, removing the shawl in which he had already enveloped himself. 'But this alacrity in joining his wife, in the present overcharged state of the domestic atmosphere, is something quite new. The sky is not going to fall, is it?' he added, looking up interrogatively.

'No; but really, Geoffrey, you shouldn't have left her,' remonstrated Helen. 'The garden is an awful eerie place by moonlight, I should not care to take a solitary walk there myself.'

. . . . . .

The pear-tree, which was to have been the goal, was the pear-tree *par excellence* of the whole garden; it was trained along a wall covered with fruit-trees, beneath which ran a broad gravel terrace, ap-

proached by several flights of steps, one of which was exactly opposite this particular tree.

Alice, breathless and triumphant, had arrived first at the foot of the steps. She looked up and down the broad walk; no sign of Geoffrey.

'How very odd!' she thought.

Presently she heard his rapidly-approaching footsteps, and, mounting the terrace, began to gather pears with much deliberation. Hearing him arrive, she never troubled to turn her head, merely remarking, as she reached up for a lovely, yellow, corpulent pear,—

'Snail! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I could trundle a wheelbarrow faster than you can run.'

'Could you indeed?' replied her husband, putting his arm round her slender waist.

'Geoffrey, how dare— Reginald!' she gasped, dropping all the pears.

'*I* may *dare*, may I not?' said he, taking her in his arms and giving her twenty kisses. 'Look here,' said he, smiling at her indignant eyes and crimson cheeks, 'I've just had a letter from you, my darling,' producing the letter, and hurriedly telling her the story.

'And the other one I wrote to Afghanistan?' she asked breathlessly.

'That I never heard of till now; the Afridis made short work of our letters.'

'Then you never had a line from me till to-day?' she cried, backing towards the wall and looking at him with dilated eyes.

'Never, since I left Cannes.'

'Then oh, Regy, *what* must you have thought of me?'

'Just what I have been asking myself, *what* can you have thought of me? No wonder you called me harsh, cruel, and tyrannical; such names were too mild a term for me. What an unmanly, vin-

dictive wretch I must have appeared! And you, you richly deserve the name of the "patient Grizzel." Don't you think so?' drawing her towards him by both hands. 'Come, tell me what you thought of me for never answering your letter.'

Too overwhelmed to speak, she stood dumb before him, with both her little trembling hands in his.

'You can't think,' he went on, 'how I hoped and hoped for even one line, after that Cheetapore affair had been cleared up. Surely then I learnt that "hope deferred maketh the heart sick."'

Seeing the ready tears in Alice's eyes, he stopped. 'Why, you little goose, you are never going to cry *now*, are you? It was not your fault I did not get your letter. I have it safe now, and I am the happiest man in England this instant; that is to say,' lowering his voice almost to a whisper, 'if you will forgive me, Alice, and if you love me still.'

'Forgive you!' she echoed, speaking with an effort; 'it is for you to forgive *me*. Do forgive me,' she pleaded, with lovely beseeching eyes; 'it cost me more than *you*. My punishment seemed at times greater than I could bear.'

At the mere recollection of what she had endured, two large tears that could no longer be suppressed escaped from her eyelashes, and rolled down her pale cheeks.

'My Alice, my love, you were forgiven long, long ago; only it seemed to me, till now, that you did not want my forgiveness. You would not speak, and I could not; I tied my hands most effectually that day on Southsea pier. And, after all, Alice, you would not have respected me if I had not required some apology, or if I had tendered you a forgiveness you had never asked for, after the way you broke up our home and turned me adrift. No, my darling,' in answer to a piteous look, 'I am not

scolding you. I never, never will be rough or rude to you again, if you will promise to forgive me for the barbarous way I have treated you lately. When I think of the thousand-and-one rudenesses I've been guilty of—intentionally too—I feel that I am asking a great deal. If I had only your capacity for blushing, you would see how thoroughly ashamed I feel. Am I to be forgiven?' leaning towards her.

'Of course you are.'

'And,' speaking still more earnestly, 'you like me a little in spite of all?'

A deep blush was his only answer for some seconds; then, with an effort, she raised her truthful eyes to his, and said,—

'You know I do; you need not have asked. It is,' she pursued, with emotion, 'far more a question whether—whether you care for me. I know you never will, never can, as you once did; but it has seemed to me at times that you almost hated me.'

'Indeed?' with a beaming smile, long foreign to his countenance; 'I see you are more easily imposed upon than ever. You know very well—it is patent even to Geoffrey—that I have always loved you exactly three times better than you love me. It is not in your nature to love as I do, though I never make much fuss about my feelings; still you may as well know that you are more to me, ten times over, than anything in the world. Even at the worst of times it has always been the same. What troubled me most, when I thought I was dying, was, *not* my many sins and shortcomings, *not* the thought of a future world, *not* what ought to come first with all of us—my soul; no, it was you, that I might only see you once more, even for an instant, was the prayer, the thought, that never left me night or day. I will not conceal from you, Alice, that I did my very best to stifle recollection, to forget you, to throw my whole

heart into my profession. It was no good; nothing, not a draught of the Egyptian nepenthe itself would have banished you from my heart. When I first went to India I used to take long headlong rides, half in hopes of galloping away from my thoughts, half in hopes of killing myself. I sometimes think I was a little mad then.'

'Reginald, you must have been!' she exclaimed, with conviction.

'Yes; you don't half know how miserable I've been without you. Well, I quieted down in time, and when the fighting came off I took it out of myself in that way. But wherever I was, you were seldom absent from my mind; whether alone in my quarters, or sitting round a noisy camp fire, or on a still starry night, on the line of march, your face was ever before me. As to never caring for you as before, I believe I love you better—yes, better than when we were first married; though had anyone suggested such a possibility at the time, I would have throttled him on the spot. But do not,' he continued, with a smile, 'spread the fact among the young married ladies of your acquaintance; they might try and follow your example, with scarcely such happy results. Lovers' quarrels are not *always* the renewing of love.'

'How can you joke on such a subject, Regy?' she asked, almost inarticulately.

'Well, then, I'll be serious once more. Never, as long as you live, doubt my love for you, Alice. Do you believe in it now?'

'I do,' she whispered, 'and you have made me very, very happy.'

'Then you can't refuse to make *me* happy! You have not given me one kiss yet, remember, and you have three years' arrears to make up. To begin with, I'll take the one you offered me the other night now.'

'I daresay you will,' she replied demurely, with

a spice of her old spirit. 'Have you ever heard, "He that will not when he may," etc.?' And you took quite enough just now to last you for a long time,' she added, with a deep blush.

'You are not going to put me on allowance, are you? I tell you plainly I won't stand it. After offering me a kiss, you never can again pretend you are shy. Now, candidly, *can* you? I'm afraid you are a little impostor,' quietly insinuating his arm round her waist.

'I see you are as great a tease as ever at any rate, Reginald,' she exclaimed tragically. 'If you ever dare to allude to my foolish, idiotical offer, I won't say what I shall do to you. I am not an impostor, and you know very well I *am* shy; you often said it—it—'

'Well, go on, I would not commence a sentence I was afraid to finish, if I were you.'

'Well, that it was my only fault—there!'

'And so it was; and as you are cured now, of course you are perfect.'

A silence. At length she said,—

'Were you really going away to-morrow, Regy?'

'Yes, indeed I was. I have been lingering on here from day to day, hoping for one little word, just one, and it did not come. I should have gone back into the world a hard, embittered, cynical man. You smile; you think I am that already?'

'Tell me, Regy, will you be the very same Regy I knew of old, and will the rude, cold, stern guardian I have met lately, and—I tell you in confidence that I am a little afraid of—will he go?'

'He will,' replied her husband, with quiet decision. 'He will take his departure along with the haughty young lady with whom he gets on so well. Are you sorry? Are you sorry to lose your guardian and find your husband?'

'Sorry!' she repeated, taking the flower out of

his button-hole with the calmest air of rightful appropriation. 'Do I *look* sorry? By the way, for the third time of asking, you may as well give me my wedding-ring'—fastening the flower in the front of her dress, and holding out a small white palm. 'How glad I shall be to see it again!' she exclaimed, as she eagerly watched him disengaging it from his chain.

'Here it is,' handing it to her; 'it is a travelled ring.'

'Let me see'—turning it to the moonlight and scrutinising it closely—'if it is my own. Yes, there is the 'R. A.' entwined. Now, please to put it on.'

'Alice,' he said, taking her little ringless hand in his and slipping it on her finger, 'remember, you are not to remove it again.'

'I never will, you may be very sure, as long as I live, and when I die it shall be buried with me. See, it is quite too big for me now,' holding up her hand.

'It is indeed,' he reluctantly owned to himself, as he looked at the fragile, almost transparent fingers held up for his inspection. An agonising thought flitted through his brain and turned his heart, as it were, to ice. 'Had he gained her but to lose her after all?'

'Why do you shiver?' cried Alice gaily. 'Why do you look so odd—you are not ill, are you?'

'I'll? Not I!' recovering himself with an effort. 'It is probably your friend the goose walking over my grave.'

'Don't talk of graves,' she said, with a shudder, drawing nearer to him involuntarily, and laying her hand on his shoulder.

'You don't know,' she added, in a low voice, 'what a good wife I am going to be. You have given me back my wedding-ring, and in return I promise solemnly to be truthful, loving, and obedient as long as I live. Nothing but death can

ever come between us now,' she added tremulously, as, stealing her arm round his neck, she gave him the tenderest and shyest of kisses.

'You little witch!' he exclaimed, returning it with interest. 'Do you know that that is almost the first kiss you have ever given me of your own accord, Lady Fairfax? What a change a few hours can make in one's life! This morning, mine seemed so empty, so cheerless; just what it has been for the last three years. I had no one to look after, or care about much, except myself, and I am not very fond of myself; sometimes, I know all my faults quite as well, nay, far better than you do.'

'What are they?' she asked, with a smile. 'Let us compare notes.'

'I am determined to the verge of obstinacy, and beyond it. Proud to a degree little short of insanity. Overbearing, supercilious, tenacious; I would die sooner than yield, once I have made up my mind that I am in the right. If I had been less blinded by my pride, I would have written to you when Maurice was born, and saved us both two long miserable years. How can I ever make amends to you, my darling? How can I ever overtake these years I have left you alone?'

'Hush!' she said, 'you must not abuse yourself. It has been all my fault from first to last; it is only like you to take the blame, but you know very well it all lies at *my* door. But, indeed, indeed I have been punished, and justly punished! I ought to have trusted you, Reginald; if I had followed my first impulse I would have spared myself many a bitter tear. I seem to have been under some malign influence, and to have had an absolute vocation for making you and myself miserable, that awful winter that seems so many years ago. Since then, Time has crawled by and brought no remedies for *me*—a blank, empty future,

and nothing to look back on but hateful haunting recollections; only for Maurice I must have gone melancholy mad. You will never leave me again, will you? You won't go to Looton now?' she added suddenly.

'Yes; in fact, I must. I'll run down there for a few days and see how everything is getting on, look into the accounts, ride over the home farm, etc., and tell them to be ready for us at Christmas.'

'At Christmas!' she echoed, in amazement.

'Yes. I shall then come back here and take you off abroad for the next three months. You were talking of Nice the other day; will you accept *me* as a companion instead of your aunt? How would you like to spend the autumn in Italy?'

'And Maurice?'

'Oh, Maurice will be made over to Helen; she will take excellent care of him. He has had a very good time the last two years; it's *my* turn now. I must have you all to myself, no rivals, small or large, which is one reason why I don't want to settle down at home just at present. We should have nothing but one scene of visiting, feasting, and mutual entertainments. Whereas roaming about abroad, we can scorn all social claims, spend our time as we please, and, if the worst comes to the worst, pretend we are bride and bridegroom. If you are a good girl and get strong and well by Christmas, I shall bring you home again; if not, I shall take you on to Egypt.'

'Egypt!' she echoed. 'Why Egypt? And why do you sigh, Regy, and look at me so wistfully?' she asked, raising her grey eyes to his fond dark ones, that seemed to brim over with a look of anguish she could not understand.

'I did not sigh,' he replied mendaciously. 'And why not go to Egypt? You know you have always had a craving to out-travel Helen and to see the

old Nile. Come, it is getting late, I cannot let you stay out any longer; the dew is falling, you must go in.'

'Ah! I see you have had enough of me already,' she replied, with a pretty little shrug. 'Tell me, Regy, who have you got in this locket?—you never used to wear one?'

'Who do you think—are you jealous? A Begum who took rather a fancy to me,' he said, opening the case and revealing herself. 'As long as I had the original, I never wore it, of course. I believe this locket is a kind of talisman; it has been twice into action, for I never left it out of my possession night or day.'

They were slowly promenading up and down the centre garden-walk, now stopping for an instant, now again going on, this time very, very leisurely, as it was positively the last turn they were to take. On this point Reginald was resolute, although he grudged sorely to shorten the happiest hour he had known for years. Oblivious of all the world, and absorbed in each other, they were approaching the gate, which suddenly burst open, and Geoffrey, singing, 'Alice, where art thou?' appeared.

'I've been sent,' he shouted, 'to know if you mean to roost in the pear-tree? *Where* are the pears?' he added imperiously. 'Why, what's all this? I do believe,' looking from one to the other, 'that you two have buried the hatchet, come off the war-path, and smoked the pipe of peace!'

'Yes, wise and observant Geoffrey, you are right for once. We have been the victims of an unfortunate accident that has cost us both very dearly,' replied Reginald gravely.

'Hip, hip, hurrah!' cried Geoffrey, dancing a war-dance round them, concluding with three wild bounds into the air.

'I really must embrace you, my dear Regy. You know I'd twice as soon have you as Alice.'

So saying, he flung himself on Reginald *à la Française.*

'No, no, my dear fellow, you really must excuse me,' pushing him back. 'If you must kiss somebody, you may kiss Alice; and for your kind congratulations, conveyed, I presume, by those wild evolutions just now, receive my warmest thanks. Also,' he added, more seriously, 'for all your well-meant but unsuccessful endeavours to reconcile us, all the *tête-à-tête* rides and walks you contrived. Only you are not an old woman, you would make a superb chaperon.'

A less shrewd observer than Geoffrey could see that this assumed gaiety covered a deeper emotion Reginald could hardly conceal.

'Well, here, Alice, is a kiss for you, by your lord and master's permission.'

'Imagine you have had it, it will do as well,' cried Alice, waving him away with both hands.

'All right,' replied Geoffrey, rather huffed. 'Imagination is nö doubt better than reality in this particular instance. I always knew if anyone could manage you, or get you along at all in double harness, it was our right honourable friend. But you must confess you jibed frightfully at starting. Plenty of the whip, that's what you all want.

> "A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree,
> The more you beat them the better they be."

Isn't that so?'

'Geoffrey!' exclaimed Alice, 'have you taken leave of your senses? If people were to see you whooping and springing about they would certainly think we kept a private lunatic asylum, and that you were one of our most dangerous patients. Do be cautious, the moon is at the full!'

Reginald having started off to fetch the pears, Geoffrey watched him out of sight, and then said,

'Alice, my good girl, seriously and soberly, I never was so glad of anything in all my life. He is the best fellow I ever knew, and ten times too good for you.'

'No one knows that better than myself,' she replied meekly, to Geoffrey's unbounded surprise.

'Good-night, Geoff; I'm going. Tell him to tell them; I couldn't,' she added, vanishing through the gateway.

'Alice has gone, Rex,' said Geoffrey, 'and you are to break it gently to the family. No one could eat pears now; leave them on the garden seat and come along. You and Alice are the only *pair* they will think of to-night.'

In a few minutes they had rejoined the party in the pleasure-ground.

'Well, what has kept you? Have you brought the pears?' inquired Helen languidly.

'No; but I have brought you a piece of good news instead. You can guess what it is, can you not?'

'I can, my dear Regy,' she replied, rising hastily—her active mind having grasped the truth in one second—and kissing him with effusion. 'I know there is only one thing that could make you look so happy. Where is Alice?'

'This,' said Geoffrey, with mock gravity, taking Reginald's unwilling hand, 'is Petruchio. Katharina has retired. In plain English, Alice was too bashful to return here, and desired me to accept your congratulations as her deputy. I've no doubt, Helen, that you and Miss Ferrars will find her in her room.'

Helen and Miss Ferrars were not long in acting on this hint, and found Alice sitting on the window-sill in the moonlight, leisurely unplating her long, golden-brown plaits. She received them with smiles and tears.

'I knew you would come,' she said, throwing her-

self into Helen's arms; 'you have always been our good genius. You have heard it all from him, have you not?' she whispered.

'Only a sketch—a mere outline,' Helen replied, seating herself. 'I have a vague idea that you are going abroad; that I am to have charge of Maurice, and that we are all to meet at Looton at Christmas. The moment I saw Regy's face I knew what had happened. Dear boy! it does one good to see him looking like himself once more.'

The three ladies remained talking together till the small hours, much to the detriment of Alice and Mary's roses, and the tale of the lost letter was told and re-told, deplored and discussed, at least ten times over.

The next morning Reginald started for Looton, and within a week Sir R. and Lady Fairfax were among the fashionable departures for the Continent, and the party at Monkswood dispersed to reunite at Christmas.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.'

IT is the end of the first week in January—bleak, black January! Outside Looton the snow is falling lightly but persistently; already it is a foot deep in the park. It is a bitterly cold, dreary, dark evening. Not a single living creature is abroad that can possibly find shelter. What a night for the homeless—what a night for the miserable starving birds!

Inside Looton the prospect is much more cheerful. A huge log fire is roaring up the chimney of the great hall, lighting up the frames of dingy-looking portraits, reflecting itself in more than one dinted steel cuirass and battered casque, and gener-

ally illuminating the arms and armour of many a dead and gone Fairfax.

A large mastiff lies luxuriously at full length on a tiger-skin before the fire; but of other living inmates the room is empty. The letter-box stands on the table; no one is looking—let us have a peep. Here is an epistle from Mrs Mayhew to Miss Saville, which will doubtless tell us all the family news.

'LOOTON, *Jan. 5th.*

'MY DEAR MISS SAVILLE,—I am quite ashamed of myself for never having answered your kind New Year's letter. But you have *no* idea what a whirl we have been living in since Christmas. I never seem to have a moment to myself.

'Nearly all the party have gone out skating to-day—an amusement not at all in *my* line—so at last I have an hour to devote to my many indignant correspondents.

'You have heard from Alice frequently, of course, and I am sure she has told you how much we have missed you, and how disappointed she and Regy have been at your absence. It is really too bad of your old enemy, rheumatism, to seize on you just at this time.

'We have had such a Christmas! Reginald and Alice determined that, as it was the *first* they had ever spent together, they would celebrate the occasion properly. There was a dinner to the tenantry, to whom Maurice was duly presented in the character of the heir. Theatricals and a ball entertained the grandees; nor were the poor forgotten—beef, coals, warm clothes, and money were lavishly bestowed on every side. The master and mistress of Looton are so happy themselves, they do their very best to spread that rather scarce commodity in all directions, and share it with rich and poor, as far as money and kind words and deeds can go.

'You will like to hear all about Alice and Regy from a third party, especially, as I know how reticent Alice is about herself—her letters are probably filled with Maurice and Reginald, Reginald and Maurice.

'Four months in Italy have worked wonders for her. She has completely recovered her blooming cheeks, her gay spirits, and, above all, her health. She still looks a mere girl in her teens, and as little of the matron as ever. I have done my best to put a stop to her hunting, but it is of no use, especially as she has Regy's permission and countenance. He only takes her when the distances are moderate and the country to match, and as she is always superbly mounted, and well looked after and piloted by her husband, I don't think you need be nervous; and I must say they both enjoy it so much, and look so supremely happy when setting out together on a hunting morning, that it seems almost a pity to make any more protests.

'Reginald is a changed man—no longer silent, morose, and cynical; he is my own dear light-hearted Regy once more, and enters into everything with as much zest and spirit as Geoff himself. A happier couple than he and Alice could not be found. It is a pleasure to see them together. She runs a good chance of being completely spoiled, only for her sweet, unselfish disposition. She is allowed her own way in everything. Fortunately it is Reginald's way too, so there is no harm done. Their opinions, wishes, and tastes seem to be identical. Some day or other Alice's individuality will be completely lost and absorbed in Reginald's stronger mind and will. I tell him this sometimes, and make him extremely angry. I am keeping our great piece of news to the last, as a *bonne bouche*. I am sure you will be interested to know that Captain Vaughan and Mary Ferrars are engaged. He

has been here since the first week in December, and their happiness is now of a whole week's standing. They seem to be very well suited and mutually in love. He confided to me that it was the extreme felicity of Reginald and Alice that had encouraged him to follow *their example.* This time last year who would have believed that they would be the couple—of all others—to lure their friends into matrimony! At times I feared a very different conclusion. However, they fully bear out the good old saying, "All's well that ends well."

'With love and best wishes for the New Year, ever, dear Miss Saville,—Yours affectionately,

'HELEN MAYHEW.'

THE END.

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